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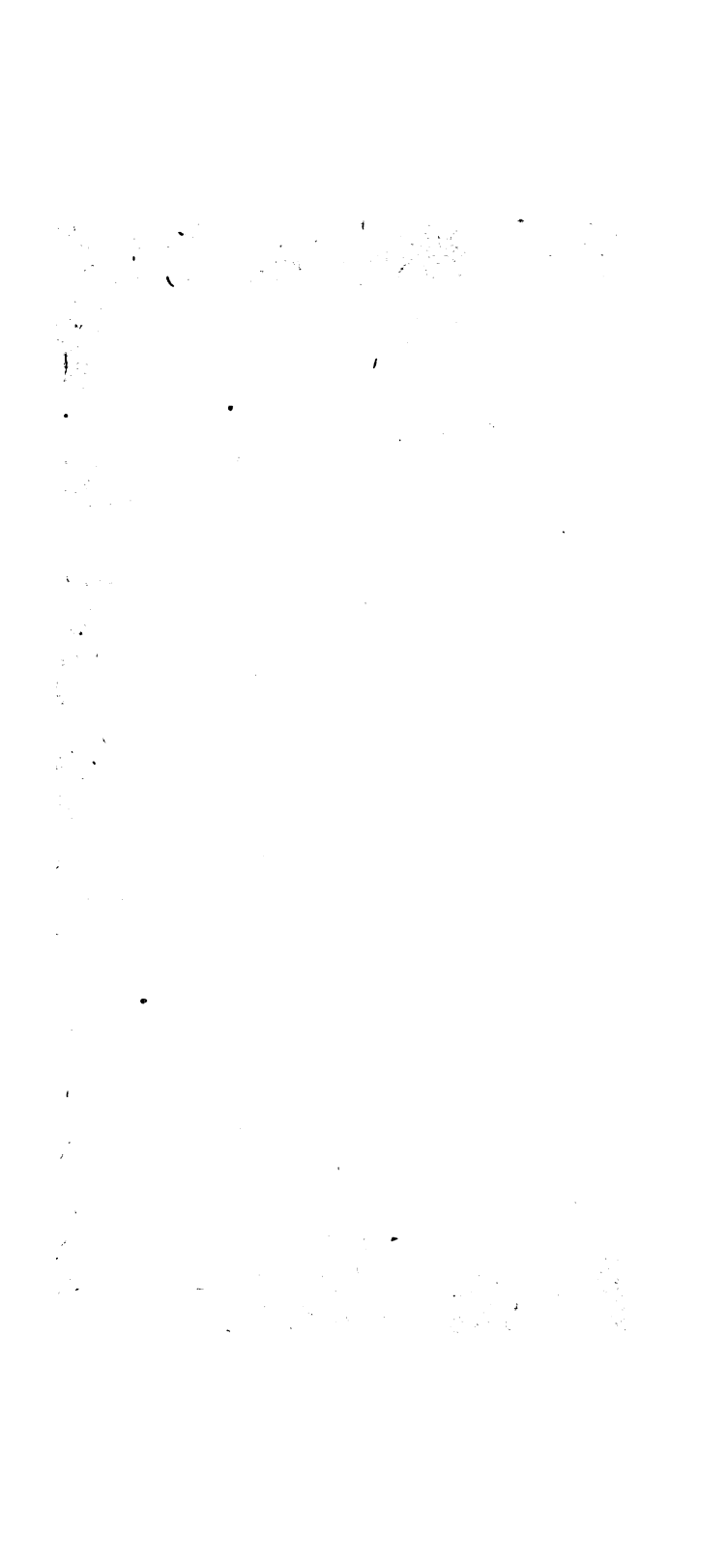
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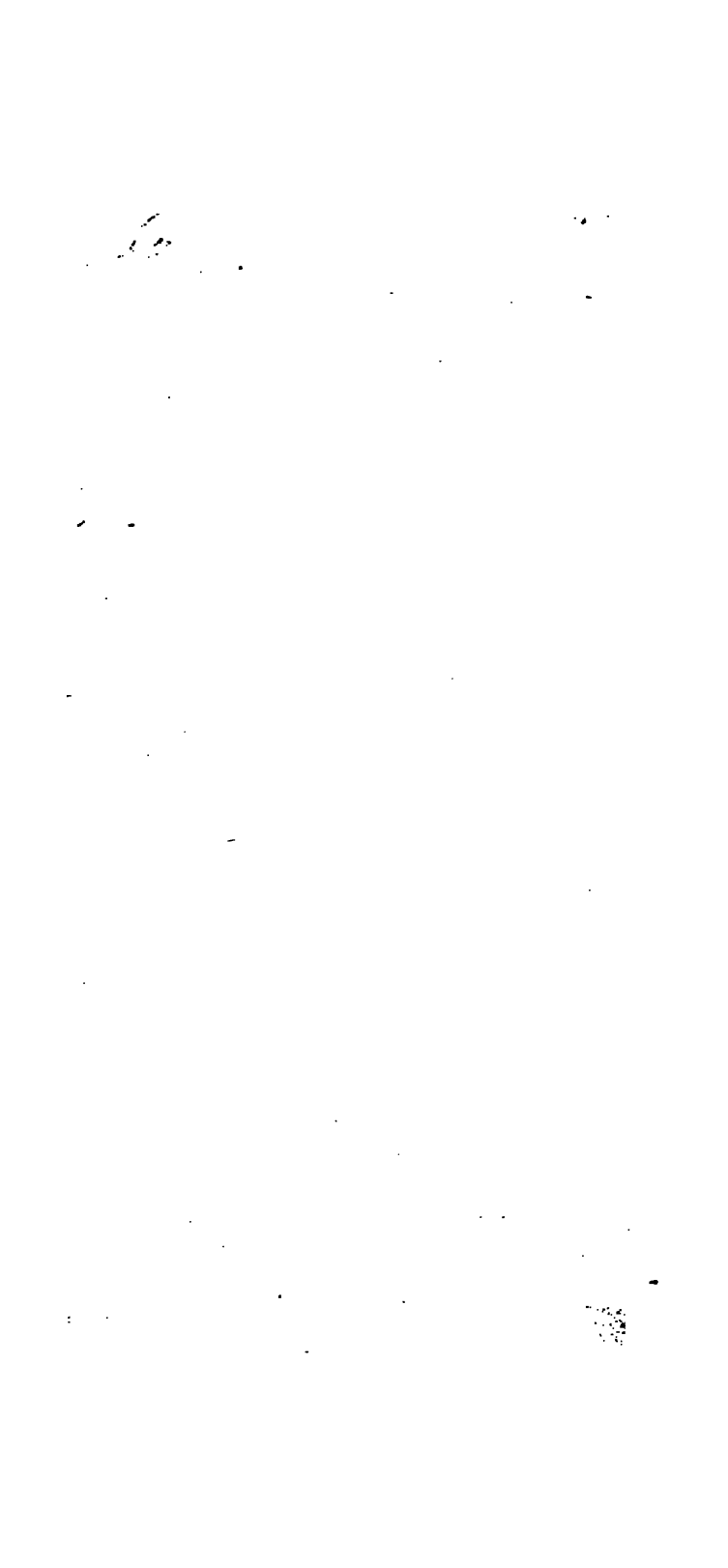




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A
SERIOUS INQUIRY
INTO THE
NATURE AND EFFECTS
OF THE
STAGE:

AND A LETTER RESPECTING PLAY ACTORS.

BY THE
Rev. JOHN WITHERSPOON, DD. L. L. D.
Late President of the College at Princeton, New-Jersey.

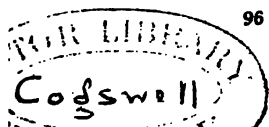
ALSO
A SERMON,
ON THE
BURNING OF THE THEATRE AT RICHMOND, &c.

BY SAMUEL MILLER, D. D.
Pastor of the first Presbyterian Church in New-York.

TOGETHER WITH
AN INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS,
BY SEVERAL MINISTERS IN NEW-YORK, &c.

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AN
ADDRESS,
BY
SEVERAL MINISTERS IN NEW-YORK,
TO THEIR
CHRISTIAN FELLOW-CITIZENS,
DISSUADING THEM FROM
ATTENDING THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS,
AND DESIGNED AS AN
INTRODUCTION
TO
DR. WITHERSPOON'S INQUIRY.



AN ADDRESS,

&c.

THE excitement produced, everywhere throughout our country, by the recent calamity which befel the capital of the state of Virginia, is in many instances accompanied with a solemn inquiry into the moral tendency of the Theatre—the unhappy occasion of that calamity. The friends of religion, generally, in this city, while they weep over the woes of Richmond, appear anxious to improve the painful dispensation for the moral good of the present and the rising generation. We accordingly embrace the opportunity, offered by the present state of public sensibility, to address you on the subject of the Stage, and to direct your inquiries into the character of an institution, which is, always, by us, esteemed pernicious to society, and which, at the present period, will be examined by you, with more than ordinary interest. You will not do us the injustice to allege, that we, in this effort, ignobly take the advantage of an afflictive casualty for the purpose of gratifying any illiberal prejudice of our own, or promoting personal and sinister views. You will, on

the contrary, we trust, acknowledge, that in improving the proper season for uttering an affectionate warning, we discharge a duty which we owe, to our own character, to you, whose usefulness and welfare we desire to promote, and to that God, before whom, you and we are both acting our part in life, and before whom we must all appear hereafter to render a full and accurate account. In this hope,

Dear Christian Brethren,

We now address you, and recommend it to you, in the name of the Great God our Saviour, whose Disciples you are, to **WITHHOLD ALL SUPPORT FROM THE PLAY-HOUSE.**

In this recommendation, we are confident, that we are urging upon your attention a plain christian duty. It is inconsistent with your holy calling to countenance the Theatre, because, *in its origin and history it has been a public nuisance in society, in its present constitution it is criminal, under every form it is useless, and it must necessarily tend to demoralize any people who give it their support.*

1. The Theatre owes its origin to the revelry which accompanied the celebration of the feast of Bacchus, the God of wine, in the licentious ages of heathen idolatry. Dramatic representations

formed a part of that worship which the Athenians offered to this false God; and were perfectly in character with the worshippers themselves and the object of their adoration. The actors imitated whatever the poets thought proper to feign of their idol. Men and women in masquerade, appeared night and day before the public, practising the most gross immoralities, and indulging in every species of debauchery. The Goat, which is said to be injurious to the vine, and the name of which in Greek is *Tragos*, is the animal sacrificed on this occasion to *Bacchus*; and hence the revelry itself was called tragedy, and the actors tragedians.* The feasts were celebrated during the vintage. So gratifying however did those shows prove to the public taste in Athens, that they were demanded more frequently than the season, to which they originally belonged, recurred. Thespis, accordingly, about five hundred and thirty-six years before the christian æra, embodied a company of actors, and carried them about with him on his cart to perform tragedies wherever an audience could be assembled. And afterwards under the direction of *Æschylus*, a public Theatre was erected and

* *Τραγῆς-Ὀδῆ. Τραγῶνδῆς-Τραγῶνδισ.*

appropriated to dramatic representations. Comedy,* which was, at first, a mimicry and abuse of living and well known characters, for the amusement and gratification of the idle and the profligate, soon followed tragedy, on the public Theatre. From Greece these exhibitions passed over to Rome. But, in neither place, did the immoral tendency of the stage escape the observation of the more sober Heathen. Their wisest and best men, their philosophers and magistrates deprecated the licentious tendency of this school of scandal, and gave warning of its danger to every society in which the evil was tolerated. Both in Athens and in Rome, the stage was not unfrequently suppressed by positive statute. The evil was popular, however, and the remedy was ineffectual. The Theatre fell, only under the power of the Gospel.

* *Komos*: was the God of revelry among the Greeks; and seems to be the same with *CHEMOSH*, the abomination of the Moabites. It is but another name for Bacchus. From the name of the Idol, both the sacred and profane writers employ *komos*, to designate that obscene festivity which was accompanied with drunkenness and music. This word is translated "*rioting*," Rom. 13 13. and "*revellings*," Gal 5. 21. & 1 Pet 4. 3. In these texts of scripture, the wanton amusements of the Theatre are expressly prohibited. The word Comedy is not, however, derived from the Idol *Comus*; but is compounded from *κωμη*, a town or village, and *ωδη*, a song. The abusive and scurrilous songs of strolling companies through the streets gave rise to Comedy.

The primitive church could not be supposed to abet a system of licentiousness of which the sensible Pagans were themselves ashamed. Christians were then as well as now exposed to seduction, from the common vices of society: but they resisted temptation with characteristic firmness. The Theatre was given up, as well as the other abominations of the heathen. Its representations were not congenial to a taste formed upon evangelical principles: nor could a correct morality hold communion with those unfruitful works of darkness. It required however on the part of the christian individual great circumspection and resolution to abstain from the criminal pleasures in which all around him were accustomed to indulge. Circumstances gave strength to the temptation. It was often recommended by the solicitations and example of a neighbour, an intimate companion of early life, a partner in business, a superior in talents and influence, and perhaps too by a wife, a brother, and a parent. The revelation of the will of God was the christian's support against the seductive influence, of affection, of frowns, and of injuries. Could he rise up, from the word of inspiration, and go to the obscene entertainment of the Play-House? That word says, *Whether, therefore, ye eat, or*

drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, revellings, and abominable idolatries. Be ye, therefore, followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love as Christ also loved us. But—all uncleanness—let it not be once named among you, as becometh Saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting which are not convenient. In correspondence with these directions, the church ordained that no play-actor should be admitted to communion without renouncing his profession. If he ever afterwards returned to his former employment he was excommunicated. The Theatre gave way, as christianity prevailed among the nations, and, in process of time, disappeared from Christendom.* Nor did it re-appear, until superstition succeeded in spreading her sable mantle

* It is a fact worthy of observation, that the Emperor Julian when, about the middle of the fourth century, he tried to restore paganism as the religion of the Roman Empire, Ordained—"That none of the priests, or those employed at the altars, should be allowed to attend the Theatres, or be seen in company of a charioteer, player, or dancer." He gave this reason for it—that the Gallileans had gained their ascendancy by their priests and people avoiding such causes of corruption, and the profligacy to which they lead. Do christians consider, as wisely as did Julian, the tendency of the Theatre? See Milner, Vol. 2. p. 123, 124.

over the christian nations. Dramatic representations were then enlisted in her service as they had originally been devoted to the worship of Heathen Gods. Certain parts of scripture history became the subject of the Drama, and afforded carnal amusement under pretence of promoting the knowledge and practice of religion. The Church of Rome, however, by her councils repeatedly raised her voice against the Theatre—the Protestant Churches with one accord condemned it, and the most faithful and pious men of every country set their faces against this evil. Irreligious and wealthy men in the European nations first introduced into their own houses such exhibitions; and when luxury and a false, as well as a licentious taste, became prevalent, the public stage obtained, in such nations, a permanent establishment. From the European continent it was introduced into England, and thence was imported into this part of America.

2. The Theatre under its present constitution in our own country, is in its nature criminal.

In order to determine whether Christians may consistently give it their presence and support, the Stage must be considered as we find it organized. It must be examined, not, as an imaginary system, but, *as it, in fact, now exists.*

And the followers of Christ, will require nothing more, to dissuade them from supporting it, than evidence that it is, in its nature, Sinful. Such evidence is of easy attainment.

Tried, by the laws of the Christian religion, the Theatre is obviously criminal, as it respects both *the actual performance of Plays*, and the very *Profession* of a Play-actor. This trial however cannot justly depend on the merits of one Play, or the personal character of an individual Actor. The System must be examined as a whole.

As it respects, in the *first* place, the actual performance of plays it is sufficient to observe in evidence of criminality, That, although there is no tragedy or comedy whatever, performed on the stage, that recommends morality upon the principles of the Gospel of the grace of God, or recommends at all to practice, the christian graces, there is scarcely one which does not contain obscene allusion, false morality, or a profanation of the name of God. And can you christians support by your presence, and by the property which God has conferred upon you for good, a set of men in the very work of conferring ornament on pernicious sentiment, in rendering licentiousness agreeable to the audience, and in violating the third commandment for your own

amusement? Will you consent to pay them for treating with disrespect your Creator and Redeemer, and think yourselves guiltless? It is impossible.

In the *second* place, the very profession of a Play-actor, is a criminal one. It was esteemed infamous even in Pagan Rome, and in every civilized society it is still disgraceful. In the light of the Gospel it is sinful.

By habitually acting in a fictitious character, truth and integrity are banished the profession, and insincerity is reduced to a system. By rendering mimicry a trade, and the amusement of men perishing in sin the principal purpose of life, the play-actor is guilty of a prostitution of the talents God has for his own glory conferred on his creatures. By repeated exertions to enter into the spirit of the character to be represented, and accordingly cherishing the feelings and the passions of the vicious, it is the play-actor's trade to cultivate the propensities which he ought to mortify; and it is not surprising that he usually exemplifies, in his own deportment, the impiety which he has so often represented on the public stage.

These evils are essential to the Theatre, and suffice to prove that the institution is in its nature sinful.

3. It is, under every form in which it can be presented, useless.

In endeavouring to dissuade you christians from attending the Theatre, we do not ask of you a great sacrifice. We do not call upon you to the performance of a hazardous duty, in which health, or property, or life can be endangered. On other occasions you may justly be urged to resist even *unto blood striving against sin*; but in this instance we recommend to you to relinquish only that which you will yourselves admit to be every way useless.

The Theatre cannot profit you in either body or soul. It has nothing calculated to promote your interest in time or through eternity. Its entertainments are all adapted to the taste of the vain, the idle, and the profligate, and will never aid you in obtaining the end of your creation. Were it of any use, as a school of morality, it would have been sanctioned by a recommendation from the Supreme Law-giver. It would recommend itself by its fruits in the distinguished virtue and piety of both the play-actors themselves, and those who habitually attend on their performances. As an intellectual exercise, instead of increasing knowledge, and invigorating genius, it dissipates, it enfeebles, and unfits the mind for the one thing needful.

Sufficient means of enjoying healthful exercise, the pleasures of social intercourse, and improving conversation, exist independently of Theatrical representation. For the acquisition of knowledge in arts, in science, in polite literature, and in morality you have no need of the stage. All the aids of christian erudition and practical godliness dwell, far, far, from its tabernacles. Nor is there an instance on record among the many thousand votaries of the drama, of a man or woman converted from sin unto God and built up in holiness and comfort by the exhibitions of the play house.

Is it by frequenting the Theatre, that the tradesman learns industry, that the merchant acquires his practical skill, that the civilian is fitted for the government of empires, that the learned professions are studied with success, that mothers and daughters become qualified to act their important part in society, or any one whatever becomes wiser or better? Wherefore, then, the vast expenditure both of time and treasure lavished upon this establishment:* and what the loss to society, were it utterly unknown?

* Time is money, for the industrious improvement of it promotes wealth, and idleness hastens to poverty. Independently however of the sacrifice of time in preparing

4. Theatrical representations necessarily tend to demoralize every society in which they are supported.

While tragedy purposes, by an exhibition of great and heroic character to cultivate a dignified morality, and comedy promises to laugh out of countenance every kind of folly and vice, both are false to their promise, and the unwary is grossly deceived. The idle and the profligate still continue to weep over tragical distress, and continue to laugh immoderately at the buffoonery of comedy, without ever undergoing a reform. It must be so. Infidelity and licentiousness are intro-

for the Theatre, in attending upon it, and in conversing about its amusements, there is a vast expenditure of money.

The Theatre in this city is the property of two gentlemen, who rent it to the present managers Messrs. Cooper and Price for the sum of six thousand dollars per annum. The expenses of the managers every play-night is averaged at four hundred and fifty dollars. Supposing the Theatre to be open three nights in each week, during eight months in the year, the annual expense of the managers will amount to fifty thousand dollars. But these managers for such an expenditure must calculate on suitable compensation. Messrs. Cooper and Price must expect not only to live by their trade; but also to make money. It is probably not above the truth if we allow, ten thousand dollars to satisfy their expectations and to defray incidental expenses. The Theatrical establishment will at this rate cost the city of New-York, annually the sum of sixty thousand dollars. And can you christians contemplate this spectacle without horror? A city enjoying the law and the gospel of God, bestowing 60,000 dollars per annum, on an immoral association of play actors, whose trade consists in demoralizing the habits and corrupting the taste of your sons and your daughters.

duced, under every form, which would diminish disgust, or be calculated to render them agreeable to the audience.

Familiarity is accordingly cultivated with the worst characters without necessity or impatience, and often even with delight.

The affections which are exercised and strengthened at the play-house, are always those of mere fallen nature, generally, those which harmonise with open profanity, and, never, those which are exclusively religious.

The sensibility, which is here excited and interested, is the creature of romance, which never occurs or acts in real life. In a city where real misery still calls for compassion and relief; there is no benevolence in contributing to the support of the stage for the purpose of exercising sympathy with ideal sorrow.

The moral sentiment, inculcated from the stage with all the graces of composition and delivery, is uniformly separated from the motives and principles of christianity, is never tested by the precepts of the divine law, and is, of course, both delusory and impious.

Revealed religion is never exhibited in its native purity. It is adulterated by an intermixture with fashionable maxims, and so reduced to the

standard of un sanctified taste. Therefore the wicked return from the play house highly gratified with his entertainment. But, if a good man ever retire from it, without disgust, it is because his taste has been corrupted by evil communications.

Human Pride and passion are fed by the productions of the Theatre. Desires and appetites are strengthened. The whole is a faithful ministry to the *flesh lusting against the spirit*, and directly counteracts the grand design of the gospel of Christ. So sensible must all the disciples of the drama be of this tendency that, none of them will ask in going to the play-house, the blessing of God on the exhibition which he is about to witness ; nor, upon his return home at an untimely hour, will he bow the knee and give thanks to Jehovah, for the play and the farce which constituted the entertainment of the evening.

Precious time is, profusely, squandered upon this fashionable folly. Great expense is incurred by it. In life it tends to eradicate all inclination for divine things ; it renders meditation and prayer both wearisome and painful, and at death it yields no support or comfort.

The full effect of the corrupt tendency of the stage is known only in the lives of the actors, or

in those haunts of dissipation into which profligates betake themselves from this chapel of devotion. The poisonous leaven, however, spreads, with rapid but imperceptible gradations, through all the circles of gay life, and, from them, to surrounding society. It is more destructive to the interests of true religion, than is the canker worm to the blossoms of the spring. The amateur of the Theatre values not the Bible but for its fancied resemblance of style to his favourite play; and if he enters the place where the christian minister delivers the message of his God to miserable man, he values the discourse only by the degree of *stage effect* which accompanies its delivery. Whenever a rage for Theatrical representations prevails, the religious taste is itself affected; and under the illusory idea of superior refinement, the enticing words of man's wisdom are apt to be preferred to the demonstration of the spirit.

The picture, brethren, which we have here given you of the Theatre, will, we are confident be found, though rapidly sketched, a correct outline. You may satisfy yourselves, by a perusal of other publications in which the argument is given in detail. We affectionately recommend to your attention, and republish for your perusal, an Essay, in which the subject has received

an ample discussion. It is from the pen of the late learned and pious Dr. Witherspoon, President of the College of New-Jersey. It is written in a plain and perspicuous style. It is replete with sensible argument, happily arranged and managed with irresistible force. In this inquiry into the nature and effects of the stage, the able author anticipates and precludes every objection, and gives ample proof of the doctrine which he proposes to maintain. A sincere christian, who reads it with sufficient care to comprehend all the reasoning which it employs, will scarcely deny, what Dr. Witherspoon has shewn, that contributing to support a public Theatre is inconsistent with the character of a christian. It will readily occur, too, to the pious mind, that a taste for the stage ought not to be cultivated by acting plays in private. The introduction of the drama into the schools of literature should be discouraged. It is very unsuitable as a branch of christian education, and has already frequently been the first step to the ruin of youth of promising talents. Many others have escaped that ruin only as *brands plucked from the burning*.

We conclude, christians, this dissuasive by quotations from the Holy Scriptures. We hope and we pray, that, through the grace of God,

y will have a due effect ; and that, hereafter, friends of decency, of morality, of religion, leave to the disciples of shameless frivolity entire enjoyment of theatrical exhibitions, as an amusement, or a system of instruction. "Take heed what ye hear. Cease to receive the instruction that causeth to err from the paths of knowledge. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak. Abstain from all appearance of evil. Be not deceived, for communications corrupt good manners. Let us walk honestly as in the day : not in chamber-and-wantonness. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness. Walk as children of light. For the love of Christ constraineth us—that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, think on these things, and the God of peace shall be with you."

SAMUEL MILLER,

PHILIP MILLEDOLER,

JNO. B. ROMEYN,

JOHN SCHUREMAN,

ALEX. M'LEOD,
THOMAS HAMILTON,
JACOB BROADHEAD,
JAMES M. MATHEWS,
JOHN X. CLARKE,
EZRA STILES ELY,
GARDINER SPRING.

A -

SERIOUS INQUIRY

INTO THE

NATURE AND EFFECTS

OF THE

STAGE.

BY THE

Rev. JOHN WITHERSPOON, DD. LL.D.



A

SERIOUS INQUIRY,

&c.

THE reader will probably conjecture, and therefore I do readily acknowledge, that what gave occasion both to the writing, and publishing the ensuing treatise, was the new tragedy of Douglas, lately acted in the theatre at Edinburgh. This, universal uncontradicted fame says, is the work of a minister of the church of Scotland. One of that character and office employing his time in writing for the stage, every one will allow is a very new and extraordinary event. In one respect neither author nor actors have suffered any thing from this circumstance : for doubtless, it contributed its share in procuring that run upon the representation, which continued for several days. Natural curiosity prompted many to make trial, whether there was any difference between a play written by a clergyman, and one of another author. And a concern of the fate of such a person excited the zeal and diligence of friends,

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to do all in their power to procure a full house, that the bold adventurer might be treated with respect and honor.

Some resolutions of the presbytery of Edinburgh seem to threaten, that public notice will be taken of this author and his associates by their superiors in the church. Whether this will be carried on, and if it be, whether they will be approved or censured; and if the last, to what degree, I pretend not to foretel. But one thing is certain, that it hath been, and will be, the subject of much thought and conversation among the laity of all ranks, and that it must have a very great influence upon the state of religion among us, in this part of the nation. That this influence will be for the better, though I resolve to examine the subject with all impartiality, I confess, I see little ground to hope. There is no doubt that it will be condemned by the great plurality of those who go by the appellation of the stricter sort. With them, it will bring a great reproach upon the church of Scotland, as containing one minister who writes for the stage, and many who think it no crime to attend the representation. It is true, no other consequences are to be apprehended from their displeasure, than the weakest of them being provoked to unchris-

tian resentment, or tempted to draw rash and general conclusions from the conduct of a few to the character of the whole, or perhaps some of them separating from the established church, none of which effects of late have been much either feared or shunned. However, even on this account, it were to be wished, either that it had never happened, or that it could be shewn, to the conviction of unprejudiced minds, that it was a just and commendable action.

But, to be sure, the chief danger is, that in case it be really a bad thing, it must give very great offence, in the scripture sense of that word, to those who are most apt to take it, viz. such as have least religion, or none at all. An offence is a stumbling-block over which the weak and unsteady are in danger of falling; that is to say, it emboldens them to commit, and hardens them in the practice of sin. Now, if the stage is unlawful or dangerous to a Christian, those who are by inclination so addicted to it that it is already difficult to convince them of their error, must be greatly confirmed in this error, by the example and countenance of such as call themselves ministers of Christ. It has accordingly already occasioned more discourse among the gay part of the world, in defence or commendation of the

stage, than past perhaps for some years preceding this event.

Nothing therefore can be more seasonable at this time, or necessary for the public good, than a careful and accurate discussion of this question, whether supporting and encouraging stage-plays, by writing, acting, or attending them, is consistent, or inconsistent, with the character of a Christian? It is to no purpose to confine the inquiry to this. Whether a minister is not appearing in an improper light, and misapplying his time and talents when he dedicates them to the service of the stage? That point would probably be given up by most, and those who would deny it do not merit a confutation. But if the matter is rested here, it will be considered only as a smaller misdemeanor, and though treated, or even condemned as such, it will still have the bad effect (upon supposition of theatrical amusements being wrong and sinful) of greatly promoting them, though we seem to be already as much given to them as even worldly considerations will allow.

The self-denying apologies common with authors, of their being sensible of their unfitness for the task they undertake, their doing it to stir up a better hand, and so on, I wholly pass, having never read any of them with approbation.

Prudence is good, and I would not willingly lose sight of it, but zeal and concern for the glory of God, and faithfulness to the souls of others, are duties equally necessary in their place, but much more rare. How far I am sensible of my own unfitness for treating this subject, and of the reputation that is risked by attempting it, the world is not obliged to believe upon my own testimony; but in whatever degree it be, it is greatly overbalanced at present, by a view of the declining state of religion among us, the prevalence of national sins, and the danger of desolating judgments.

It is some discouragement in this attempt, that it is very uncertain whether many of those, for whose sakes it is chiefly intended, and who stand most in need of information upon the subject, will take the pains to look into it. Such a levity of spirit prevails in this age, that very few persons of fashion will read or consider any thing that is written in a grave or serious style. Whoever will look into the monthly catalogues of books, published in Britain for some years past, may be convinced of this at one glance. What an immense proportion do romances, under the titles of lives, adventures, memoirs, histories, &c. bear to any other sort of production in this age?

Perhaps therefore it may be thought that it would have been more proper to have gratified the public taste, by raising up some allegorical structure, and handling this subject in the way of wit and humor ; especially as it seems to be modern principle, that ridicule is the test of truth and as there seems to be so large a fund for mirth, in the character of a stage-playing priest. But, though I deny not the lawfulness of using ridicule in some cases, or even its propriety here yet I am far from thinking it is the test of truth. It seems to be more proper for correction than for instruction ; and though it may be fit enough to whip an offender, it is not unusual, nor unsuitable, first to expostulate a little with him and shew him that he deserves it. Besides, every man's talent is not equally fit for it, and indeed now the matter seems to have been carried beyond a jest, and to require a very serious consideration.

There is also, besides some discouragement, real difficulty in entering on this disquisition. It will be hard to know in what manner to reason or on what principles to build. It were easy to show the unlawfulness of stage-plays, by such arguments as would appear conclusive to those who already hate both them and their suppo-

ters : but it is not so easy to make it appear to those who chiefly frequent them, because they will both applaud and justify some of the very things that others look upon as the worst effects of the practice, and will deny the very principles on which they are condemned. The truth is, it is our having different views of the nature of religion, that causes different opinions upon this subject. For many ages there was no debate upon it at all. There were players, but they did not pretend to be Christians themselves, and they had neither countenance nor support from any who did. Whereas now, there are abundance of advocates for the lawfulness, some for the usefulness, of plays ; not that the stage is become more pure, but that Christians are become less so, and have lowered the standard or measure requisite to attain and preserve that character.

But there is still another difficulty, that whoever undertakes to write against plays, though the provocation is given by what they are, is yet always called upon to attack them, not as they are, but as they might be. A writer on this subject is actually reduced to the necessity of fighting with a shadow, of maintaining a combat with an ideal or imaginary sort of drama, which never yet existed, but which the defenders of

the cause form by way of supposition, and which shall appear, in fact, in that happy future age which shall see, what these gentlemen are pleased to style, a well regulated stage. However little support may seem to be given by this to a vicious and corrupted stage, there is no attender of plays but, when he hears this chimera defended, imagines it is his own cause that is espoused, and with great composure and self-satisfaction, continues his practice. A conduct not less absurd than if one who was expressly assured a certain dish of meat before him was poisoned, should answer thus, All meat is not poisoned, and therefore I may eat this with safety.

It is very plain, that were men but seriously disposed, and without prejudice desiring the knowledge of their duty, it would not be necessary in order to show the unlawfulness of the stage, as it now is, to combat it in its imaginary reformed state. Such a reformation, were not men by the prevalence of vicious and corrupt affections, in love with it, even in its present condition, would have been long ago given up as a hopeless and visionary project, and the whole trade or employment detested, on account of the abuses that had always adhered to it. But since all advocates for the stage have and do still defend it in

this manner, by forming an idea of it separate from its evil qualities ; since they defend it so far with success, that many who would otherwise abstain, do, upon this very account, allow themselves in attending the theatre sometimes, to their own hurt and that of others ; and, as I am convinced on the most mature deliberation, that the reason why there never was a well regulated stage, in fact, is because it cannot be, the nature of the thing not admitting of it ; I will endeavor to shew, that PUBLIC THEATRICAL REPRESENTATIONS, either tragedy or comedy, are, in their general nature or in their best possible state, unlawful, contrary to the purity of our religion ; and that writing, acting or attending them, is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. If this be done with success, it will give great weight to the reflections which shall be added upon the aggravation of the crime, considering the circumstances that at present attend the practice.

But, though I have thus far complied with the unreasonable terms imposed by the advocates for this amusement, they must not proceed to any higher demand, nor expect, because they have prevailed to have plays considered in the way that they themselves desire, that therefore the

same thing must be done by religion, and that it must be lowered down to the descriptions they are sometimes pleased to give of it. I will by no means attack plays upon the principles of modern relaxed morality. In that case, to be sure, it would be a lost cause. If some late writers on the subject of morals be permitted to determine what are the ingredients that must enter into the composition of a good man, that good man, it is agreed, may much more probably be found in the play-house than in any other place. But what belongs to the character of a Christian must be taken from the holy Scriptures, the word of the living God. Notwithstanding therefore, that through the great degeneracy of the age, and very culpable relaxation of discipline, not a few continue to be called Christians, who are a reproach to the name, and support and countenance one another in many practices contrary to the purity of the Christian profession, I shall beg leave still to recur to the unerring standard, and to consider, not what many nominal Christians are, but what every real Christian ought to be.

In so doing I think I shall reason justly ; and at the same time it is my resolution, not only to speak the sense, but, as often as possible, the very language and phrases of the Scripture, and

of our pious fathers. These are either become venerable to me for their antiquity, or they are much fitter for expressing the truths of the gospel, and delineating the character and duty of a disciple of Christ, than any that have been invented in later times. As the growth or decay of vegetable nature is often so gradual as to be insensible; so in the moral world, verbal alterations, which are counted as nothing, do often introduce real changes, which are firmly established before their approach is so much as suspected. Were the style, not only of some modern essays, but of some modern sermons, to be introduced upon this subject, it would greatly weaken the argument, though no other alteration should be made. Should we every where put virtue for holiness, honor, or even moral sense for conscience, improvement of the heart for sanctification, the opposition between such things and theatrical entertainments would not appear half so sensible.

By taking up the argument in the light now proposed, I am saved, in a great measure, from the repetition of what has been written by other authors on the subject. But let it be remembered, that they have clearly and copiously shewn the corruption and impurity of the stage and its

adherents, since its first institution, and that both in the heathen and Christian world. They have made it undeniably appear, that it was opposed and condemned by the best and wisest men, both heathens and Christians in every age*. Its very defenders do all pretend to blame the abuse of it. They do indeed allege that this abuse is not essential to it, but may be separated from it; how

* Particularly at Athens, where it first had its birth both tragedy and comedy were soon abolished by public authority; and among the Romans, though this and other public shows were permitted in a certain degree yet so cautious were that wise people of suffering them to be frequent, that they did not permit any public theatre when occasionally erected, to continue above a certain number of days. Even that erected by M. Scaurus which is said to have cost so immense a sum as a million sterling, was speedily taken down. Pompey the Great was the first who had power and credit enough to get a theatre continued.

The opinion of Seneca may be seen in the following passage: —“Nihil est tam damnosum bonis moribus, quam in aliquo spectaculo desidere. Tunc enim per voluptatem tem facilius vitia surrepunt.”

As to the primitive Christians, see *Constit. Apost. lib. 8. cap. 32.* where actors and stage-players are enumerated among those who are not to be admitted to baptism. Many different councils appoint that they shall renounce their arts before they be admitted, and if they return to them shall be excommunicated. Tertullian *de Spectaculis, cap. 22.* observes, That the heathens themselves marked them with infamy, and excluded them from all honors and dignity. To the same purpose see *Aug. de Civitate Dei. lib. 2. cap. 14.* “Actores poeticarum fabularum remouent a societate civitatis—ab honoribus omnibus repellunt homines scenicos.”

The opinion of moderns is well known, few Christian writers of any eminence having failed to pronounce sentence against the stage.

ever, all of them, so far as I have seen, represent this separation as only possible or future ; they never attempt to assign any æra in which it could be defended as it then was, or could be affirmed to be more profitable than hurtful. Some writers do mention a few particular plays of which they give their approbation. But these have never yet, in any age or place, amounted to such a number, as to keep one society of players in constant employment, without a mixture of many more that are confessedly pernicious. The only reason of bringing this in view at present when it is not to be insisted on, is, that it ought to procure a fair and candid hearing to this attempt to prove, That the stage, after the greatest improvement of which it is capable, is still inconsistent with the purity of the Christian profession. It is a strong presumptive evidence in favor of this assertion, that, after so many years' trial, such improvement has never actually taken place.

It is perhaps also proper here to obviate a pretence, in which the advocates of the stage greatly glory, that there is no express prohibition of it to be found in scripture. I think a countryman of our own* has given good reasons to believe, that the apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians,

* The late Mr. Anderson.

chap. v. ver. 4. by "filthiness, foolish talking
"and jesting," intended to prohibit the plays that
were then in use. He also thinks it probable, that
the word *Komais* used in more places than one,
and translated "revelling," points at the same
thing. Whether his conjectures are just or not, it
is very certain that these, and many other pas-
sages, forbid the abuses of the stage; and if these
abuses be inseparable from it, as there is reason
to believe, there needed no other prohibition of
them to every Christian. Nay, if they never had
been separated from it till that time, it was suf-
ficient: and it would be idle to expect that the
scripture should determine this problematical
point, Whether they would ever be so in any
after age. To ask that there should be produced
a prohibition of the stage, as a stage, universally,
is to prescribe to the Holy Ghost, and to require
that the scripture should not only forbid sin, but
every form in which the restless and changeable
dispositions of men shall think fit to be guilty of
it, and every name by which they shall think
proper to call it. I do not find in scripture any
express prohibition of masquerades, routs and
drums; and yet I have not the least doubt, that
the assemblies called by these names, are contra-
ry to the will of God, and as bad, if not worse,

than the common and ordinary entertainments of the stage.

In order to make this inquiry as exact and accurate as possible, and that the strength or weakness of the arguments on either side, may be clearly perceived, it will be proper to state distinctly, what we understand by the stage, or stage-plays, when it is affirmed, that in their most improved and best regulated state, they are unlawful to Christians. This is the more necessary, that there is a great indistinctness and ambiguity in the language used by those who, in writing or conversation, undertake to defend it. They analyze and divide it into parts, and take sometimes one part, sometimes another, as will best suit their purpose. They ask, What there can be unlawful in the stage abstractedly considered? Comedy is exposing the folly of vice, and pointing out the ridiculous part of every character. And is not this commendable? Is not ridicule a noble means of discountenancing vice? And is not the use of it warranted by the satire and irony that is to be found in the holy scriptures? Tragedy, they say, is promoting the same end in a way more grave and solemn. It is a moral lecture, or a moral picture, in which virtue appears to great advantage. What is history itself, but representing the cha-

racters of men as they actually were, and plays represent them as they may be. In their perfection, plays are as like history and nature, as the poet's art and actor's skill can make them. Is it then the circumstance of their being written in dialogue, that renders them criminal? Who will pretend that? Is it that they are publicly repeated or acted over? Will any one pretend, that it is a crime to personate a character in any case, even where no deceit is intended? Then farewell parables, figures of speech, and the whole oratorical art. Is it a sin to look upon the representation? Then it must be a sin to look upon the world, which is the original, of which plays are the copy.

This is the way which those who appear in defence of the stage ordinarily take, and it is little better than if one should say, What is a stage-play? It is nothing else abstractedly considered but a company of men and women talking together; Where is the harm in that? What hinders them from talking piously and profitably, as well as wickedly or hurtfully? But, rejecting this method of reasoning as unjust and inconclusive, let it be observed, that those who plead for the lawfulness of the stage in any country, however well regulated, plead for what implies, not by

accident, but essentially and of necessity the following things. (1.) Such a number of plays as will furnish an habitual course of representations, with such changes as the love of variety in human nature necessarily requires. (2.) These plays of such a kind, as to procure an audience of voluntary spectators, who are able and willing to pay for being so entertained. (3.) A company of hired players, who have this as their only business and occupation, that they may give themselves wholly to it, and be expert in the performance. (4.) The representation must be so frequent as that the profits may defray the expense of the apparatus, and maintain those who follow this business. They must also be maintained in that measure of luxury, or elegance, if you please, which their way of life, and the thoughts to which they are accustomed must make them desire and require. It is a thing impracticable to maintain a player at the same expense as you may maintain a peasant.

Now all these things do, and must enter into the idea of a well regulated stage; and, if any defend it without supposing this, he hath no adversary that I know of. Without these there may be poets, or there may be plays, but there cannot be a play-house. It is in vain then to go

about to show, that there have been an instance or two, or may be, of treatises wrote in the form of plays, that are unexceptionable. It were easy to shew very great faults in some of those most universally applauded, but this is unnecessary. I believe it is very possible to write a treatise in the form of a dialogue, in which the general rules of the drama are observed, which shall be as holy and serious, as any sermon that ever was preached or printed. Neither is there any apparent impossibility in getting different persons to assume the different characters, and rehearse it in society. But it may be safely affirmed, that if all plays were of that kind, and human nature to continue in its present state, the doors of the play-house would shut of their own accord, because nobody would demand access ; * unless there were an act of parliament to force attendance, and even in that case, as much pains would probably be taken to evade the law obliging to attend, as are

* This furnishes an easy answer to what is remarked by some in favor of plays, that several eminent Christians have endeavored to supplant bad plays by writing good ones ; as Gregory Nazienzen, a father of the church, and a person of great piety, and our countryman Buchanan. But did ever these plays come into repute ? Were they formerly, or are they now acted upon the stage ? The fate of their works proves that these good men judged wrong in attempting to reform the stage, and that the great majority of Christians acted more wisely who were for laying it wholly aside.

now taken to evade those that command us to abstain. The fair and plain state of this question then is, Whether it is possible or practicable in the present state of human nature, to have the above system of things under so good a regulation, as to make the erecting and countenancing the stage agreeable to the will of God, and consistent with the purity of the Christian profession.

And here let us consider a little what is the primary, and immediate intention of the stage, Whether it be for amusement and recreation, or for instruction to make men wise and good. Perhaps, indeed, the greatest part will choose to compound these two purposes together, and say it is for both : for amusement immediately, and for improvement ultimately, that it instructs by pleasing, and reforms by stealth. The patrons of a well regulated stage have it no doubt in their power to profess any of these ends in it they please, if it is equally capable of them all ; and therefore in one part or other of this discourse, it must be considered in every one of these lights. But as it is of moment, because of some of the arguments to be afterwards produced, let the reader be pleased to consider, how far recreation and amusement enter into the nature of the stage, and are, not only immediately and primarily, but chiefly and ultimately, intended by it.

If the general nature of it, or the end proposed from it when well regulated, can be any way determined from its first institution, and the subsequent practice, it seems plainly to point a amusement. The earliest productions of that kind that are now extant, are evidently incapable of any other use, and hardly even of that to a person of any taste or judgment.* They usually accompanied the feasts of the ancients in the houses of the rich and opulent,† and were particularly used in times of public rejoicing. They have indeed generally been considered, in all ages, as intended for entertainment. A modern author of high rank and reputation‡, who would not willingly hurt the cause, considers them in this light, and this alone, and represents their improvement, not as lying in their having a greater moral tendency, but in the perfection of the poet's art, and the refinement of the taste of

* This is confessed by a defender of the stage, who says, "Such of the comedies before his (that is Menander's) time, as have been preserved to us, are generally very poor pieces, not so much ludicrous as ridiculous, even a mountebank's merry andrew would be hissed, now a days, for such puerilities as we see abounding in Aristophanes." Rem. on Anderson's Positions concerning the unlawfulness of stage-plays, page 8th.

† Plut. de Glor. Athen. & Sympos. lib. 7. quest. 8. "As for the new comedy, it is so necessary an ingredient of all public entertainments, that so to speak, one may as well make a feast without wine, as without Menander."

‡ Shaftsbury.

the audience. It is only of late that men have begun to dignify them with a higher title. Formerly they were ever considered as an indulgence of pleasure, and an article of luxury, but now they are exalted into schools of virtue, and represented as bulwarks against vice. It is probable, most readers will be apt to smile when they hear them so called, and to say to their defenders, This is but overdoing, preserve them to us as innocent amusements, and we shall not much contend for their usefulness. It is indeed but an evidence of the distress of the cause ; for their advocates only take up this plea when they are unable to answer the arguments against them upon any other footing. It may also appear that they are designed for amusement, if we consider who have been the persons in all ages who have attended them, viz. the rich, the young, and the gay, those who live in pleasure, and the very business of whose lives is amusement.

But not to insist on these circumstances, I think it is plain from the nature of the thing, that the immediate intention of plays is to please, whatever effects may be pretended to flow afterwards, or by accident, from this pleasure. They consist in an exact imitation of nature, and the conformity of the personated to real characters,

This is the great aim, and the great perfection, both of the poet and of the actors. Now this imitation, of itself, gives great pleasure to the spectator, whether the actions represented are good or bad. And, in itself considered, it gives only pleasure; for the beauty of the imitation, as such, hath no moral influence, nor any connexion with morality, but what it may derive in a distant way from the nature of the actions which the poet or actors choose to represent, or the spectators are willing to see. Every person who thinks impartially, may be from this convinced, that to please, or attempt to do so, is essential to the stage, and its first, or rather its main design; how far it pollutes or purifies is accidental, and must depend upon the skill and honesty of its regulators and managers.

Having thus prepared the way, the following arguments are humbly offered to the consideration of every serious person, to shew, that a public theatre is inconsistent with the purity of the Christian profession: which if they do not to all appear to be each of them singly conclusive, will I hope, when taken together, sufficiently evince the truth of the proposition.

In the first place. If it be considered as an amusement, it is improper, and not such as any

Christian may lawfully use. Here we must begin by laying it down as a fundamental principle, that all men are bound supremely to love, and habitually to serve God ; that is to say, to take his law as the rule, and his glory as the end, not of one, but of all their actions. No man, at any time or place is nor can be, absolved from this obligation. Every real Christian lives under an habitual sense of it. I know this expression, aiming, at the glory of God, is called a cant phrase, and is despised and derided by worldly men. It were easy, however, to vindicate it from reason ; but it will suffice, to all those for whose use this discourse is intended, to say, it is a truth taught and repeated in the sacred oracles, that all things were made for, that all things shall finally tend to, and therefore, that all intelligent creatures should supremely and uniformly aim at the glory of God.

Now, we glorify God by cultivating holy dispositions, and doing pious and useful actions. Recreation is an intermission of duty, and is only necessary because of our weakness ; it must be some action indifferent in its nature, which becomes lawful and useful from its tendency to refresh the mind, and invigorate it for duties of more importance. The use of recreation is precisely

the same as the use of sleep ; though they differ in this, that there is but one way in which sleep becomes sinful, viz. by excess, whereas there are ten thousand ways in which recreations become sinful. It is needless to produce passages of Scripture to verify the above assertion concerning our obligation to glorify God. It is the language of the whole, and is particularly applied to indifferent actions by the apostle Paul, 1 Cor. x. 31 “ Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”

If there were on the minds of men in general, a just sense of this their obligation, stage-plays may, and a thousand other amusements now in use, would never have been heard of. The truth is, the need of amusement is much less than people commonly apprehend, and, where it is not necessary, it must be sinful. Those who stand in need of recreation may be divided into two sorts, such as are employed in bodily labor, and such as have their spirits often exhausted by study and application of mind. As to the first of these, a mere cessation from labor is sufficient for refreshment, and indeed of itself gives great pleasure, unless when the appetites are inflamed and irritated by frequent sensual gratifications and then they are importunately craved, and

become necessary to fill the intervals of work. Of this sort very few are able to afford so expensive a recreation as the stage. And even as to the other, viz. those whose spirits are exhausted by application of mind, only a very small number of them will chuse the diversion of the stage, for this very good reason, that social converse and bodily exercise, will answer the purpose much better. Indeed, if we consider the just and legitimate end of recreations, and compare it with the persons who most frequently engage in them, we shall find, that ninety-nine of every hundred are such as do not need recreation at all. Perhaps their time lies heavy upon their hands, and they feel an uneasiness and impatience under their present state ; but this is not from work, but from idleness, and from the emptiness and unsatisfying nature of the enjoyments, which they chase with so much eagerness, one after another, vainly seeking from them that good which they do not contain, and that satisfaction which they cannot impart.

From this I think it undeniably appears, that if no body were to attend the stage, but such as really needed recreation or amusement, upon Christian principles, and of these such only as were able to pay for it, and of these only such as

sins, never once reflect on the heavy account against you of wasted time.

Though there were no other objection against the stage as a recreation, but this one, it is surely faulty. If recreations are only lawful because necessary, they must cease to be lawful when they are no longer necessary. The length and duration of regular comedy and tragedy is already fixed and settled by rules of long standing; and, I suppose, whatever other circumstance may be confessed to need reformation, all men of taste will agree, that these shall continue as they are. Now I leave to all who know how much time the preparation for such a public appearance, and the necessary attendance, must take up, to judge whether it is not too much to be given to mere recreation.

This holds particularly in the case of recreation of mind, between which and bodily exercise there is a very great difference. For bodily exercise in some cases, for example, when the health requires it may be continued for a long time, only for this reason, that it may have effects lasting in proportion to the time spent in it. But giving the mind to pleasure by way of recreation must be short, or it is certainly hurtful; it gives men a habit of idleness and trifling, and

makes them averse from returning to any thing that requires serious application. So true is this and so applicable to the present case, that I could almost rest the whole argument upon it, that no man, who has made the trial, can deliberately and with a good conscience affirm, that attending plays has added strength to his mind, and warmth to his affections, in the duties of devotion; that it has made him more able and willing to exert his intellectual powers in the graver and more important offices of the Christian life; nay, or even made him more diligent and active in the business of civil life. On the contrary, it is commonly of such length as to produce a satiety and weariness of itself, and to require rest and refreshment to recruit the exhausted spirits, a thing quite absurd and self-contradictory in what is called a recreation.

But the stage is not merely an unprofitable consumption of time, it is further improper as a recreation, because it agitates the passions too violently, and interests too deeply, so as, in some cases, to bring people into a real, while they behold an imaginary distress. Keeping in view the end of recreation, will enable us to judge rightly of this. It is to refresh and invigorate the mind.—Therefore when, instead of rest,

which is properly called relaxation of mind, recreations are used, their excellence consists in their being, not only a pleasant, but an easy exercise of the intellectual powers. Whatever is difficult, and either requires or causes a strong application of mind, is contrary to their intention. Now it is plain, that, dramatic representations fix the attention so very deeply, and interest the affections so very strongly, that, in a little time, they fatigue the mind themselves, and however eagerly they are desired and followed, there are many serious and useful occupations, in which men will continue longer, without exhausting the spirits, than in attending the theatre.

Indeed, in this respect they are wholly contrary to what should be the view of every Christian. He ought to set bounds to and endeavor to moderate his passions as much as possible, instead of voluntarily and unnecessarily exciting them. The human passions, since the fall, are all of them but too strong; and are not sinful on account of their weakness, but their excess and misapplication. This is so generally true, that it hardly admits of an exception; unless it might be counted an exception, that some vicious passions, when they gain an ascendancy, extinguish others which

oppose their gratification. For though religion is consistent throughout, there are many vices, which are mutually repugnant to, and destructive of, each other. But this exception has little or no effect upon the present argument.

Now the great care of every Christian, is to keep his passions and affections within due bounds, and to direct, them to their proper objects. With respect to the first of these, the chief influence of theatrical representations upon the spectator, is to strengthen the passions by indulgence; for there they are all exhibited in a lively manner, and such as is most fit to communicate the impression. As to directing them to their proper objects, it will be afterwards shown, that the stage has rather the contrary effect; in the mean time, it is sufficient to observe, that it may be done much more effectually, and much more safely another way.

This tendency of plays to interest the affections, shows their impropriety as a recreation on another account. It shows that they must be exceeding liable to abuse by excess, even supposing them in a certain degree to be innocent. It is certain there is no life more unworthy of a man, hardly any more criminal in a Christian, than a life of perpetual amusement, a life where no val-

uable purpose is pursued, but the intellectual faculties wholly employed in purchasing and indulging sensual gratifications. It is also certain, that all of us are by nature too much inclined thus to live to ourselves, and not to God. Therefore, where recreations are necessary, a watchful Christian will particularly beware of those that are insnaring, and, by being too grateful and delicious, ready to lead to excess. This discriminating care and caution, is just as much the duty of a Christian, as any that can be named. Though it is immediately conversant only about the temptations and incitements to sin, and not the actual commission of it, it becomes a duty directly binding, both from the command of God, and the necessity of the thing itself. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation," Mat. xxvi. 41. says our Saviour to all his disciples; and elsewhere, "What I say unto you, I say unto all, Watch," Mark xiii. 37. And the apostle Paul to the same purpose, "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil," Eph. v. 15.

If we consider the light in which the Scripture sets our present situation, and the account there given of the weakness of human resolution, the

same thing will evidently appear to be our duty. It is impossible that we can resist the slightest temptation, but by the assistance of divine grace. Now how can this be expected, if we put our constancy to unnecessary trials, not only contrary to reason, and a prudent regard to our own safety, but in the face of an express command of God to be watchful. "Lord, lead us not into temptation," is a petition which we are taught to offer up, by him who knew what was in man. But how much do those act in opposition to this, and even in contempt of it, who make temptations to themselves. And are not stage-plays temptations of the strongest kind, in which the mind is softened with pleasure, and the affections powerfully excited? How little reason is there to hope that men in the use of them will keep within the bounds of moderation? If any expect, in such circumstances, to be preserved by divine power, they are guilty of the sin, which is in Scripture called "tempting God."

It is this very circumstance, a liableness to abuse by excess, that renders many other amusements also ordinarily unlawful to Christians, though, perhaps, in their general nature, they cannot be shown to be criminal. Thus it is not easy to refute the reasonings, by which ingeni-

ous men endeavor to show that games of hazard are not in themselves sinful; but by their enticing, insnaring nature, and the excess which almost inseparably accompanies them, there can be no difficulty in pronouncing them highly dangerous, lawful to very few persons, and in very few cases. And if they were as public in their nature as plays, if they required the concurrence of as many operators, and as great a number of persons to join in them, I could have little scruple in affirming, that, in every possible case, they would be sinful.

The preceding considerations are greatly confirmed by the following, That when plays are chosen as a recreation, for which they are so exceedingly improper, it is always in opposition to other methods of recreation, which are perfectly fit for the purpose, and not liable to any of these objections. Where recreations are necessary, if there were only one sort to be had, some inconveniencies could not be so strong an argument against the use of them. But where there are different kinds, to prefer those which are less, to those which are more fit, must needs be sinful. Such a tenderness and circumspection is indeed, in this age, so rare and unusual, that I am afraid, it will be almost impossible to

at a sense of its importance upon the mind of the reader; or, if it be done, in any measure for a moment, the example of a corrupt world, who are altogether void of it, will immediately efface the impression. But, however few may "have ears to hear it," the thing is certain, that as the progress of his sanctification is the supreme desire and desire of every Christian, so he is continually liable to be seduced by temptation, and infected by example; and therefore, from a distrust of his own resolution, will not voluntarily and unnecessarily prefer a dangerous to a safe amusement. He will prefer a very difficult and doubtful means of attaining any worldly end, to one sure and easy; prefer a clumsy improper instrument, to one perfectly fit for any piece of work, would be reckoned no small evidence of folly in the affairs of civil life. If one in sickness should chuse a medicine of a very questionable nature, of very dangerous and uncertain operation, when he had full access to one intirely safe, of approved reputation and superior efficacy, it would be esteemed next to madness. Is there not then a full conformity between the cases? Is not a like care to be taken of our souls as of our bodies? Yes, is not the obligation so much the stronger, how much the one is of greater value than the

other ? The different conduct of men, and their different fate in this respect, is well described by the wise man, "Happy is the man that feareth always, but he that hardeneth his heart shall fall into mischief," Prov. xxviii. 14.

It ought not to be omitted in shewing the impropriety of the stage as a recreation and amusement for Christians, that it is costly and expensive, and that this cost is altogether unnecessary, since the end might be obtained, not only as well, but much better, at a far cheaper rate ; perhaps, in most cases, at no expense at all. I know this argument will be treated with great contempt by those who live in affluence, and know no other use of riches but to feed their appetites, and make all the rest of mankind subservient to the gratification of their violent and ungovernable desires. But though none in this world have any title to hinder them from disposing of their wealth as they please, they must be called to consider, that they have a master in heaven. To him they must render an account at the last day, and, in this account, the use that they may make of their riches is not to be excepted. The great have, no doubt, the distinguished honor, if they please to embrace it, of contributing to the happiness of multitudes under them, and dispensing,

under God, a great variety of the comforts of this life. But it would abate the envy and impatience of the lower part of the world, and moderate their appetite after riches, if they would consider, that the more that is committed to them, the more they have to account for. The greatest and richest man on earth hath not any license in the word of God, for an unnecessary waste of his substance, or consuming it in unprofitable and hurtful pleasures ; and, under the one or both of these characters, that must fall, that is laid out upon the stage.

Let not any reader, who cannot find a satisfying answer to these objections against the stage as an unchristian amusement, from the word of God, take the practice of the world as a refuge or sanctuary, and say, This is carrying matters to an extreme ; If these maxims are rigidly adhered to, you will exclude from the number of Christians, not only the far greater part of mankind, but many otherwise of excellent and amiable characters. Though this is the weakest of all arguments, it is, perhaps, that which hath of all others the strongest effect, and most powerfully contributes to set people's minds at ease in a doubtful or dangerous practice. How hard is it to make men sensible of the evil of such sins

as custom authorizes, and fashion justifies ! There is no making them ashamed of them, because they are common, and reputable, and there is no making them afraid of what they see done, without suspicion by numbers on every hand. But is there any reason to believe, that the example of others will prove a just and valid excuse for any practice at the judgment seat of Christ? Will the greatness or the number of offenders screen them from his power? Or can that man expect a gracious acceptance with him, who has suffered his commands to be qualified by prevailing opinion, and would not follow him farther than the bulk of mankind would bear him company.

I shall close the reflections upon this part of the subject by observing, that there are two general characters of the disciples of Christ, which will appear, if we consult the scriptures, to be essential to them, and which seem altogether inconsistent with theatrical amusements. The first is self-denial and mortification. Though we should not insist upon the particular objections against the stage, there is something of pomp and gaiety in it, on the best possible supposition, that is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. The gospel is the religion of sinners, who are saved from wrath by the rich mercy and free grace of

God. The life of such then, must be a life of penitence, humility and mortification. The followers of a crucified Saviour must bear the cross, and tread in the same path of suffering and self-denial, in which he hath gone before them. In their baptismal covenant they renounce the world, by which is not meant such gross crimes as are a violation of natural light, as well as a transgression of the law of God, but that excessive attachment to present indulgence, which is more properly expressed by the pomp and vanity of the world*. It is true there are many precepts

* It is not improper here to consider the ancient form of baptism, and what was supposed by the fathers to be implied in it, Apost. Const. lib. 7. cap. 41. *apostasemini a satana, &c.* "I renounce Satan and his works, and his pomps, and his service, and his angels, and his inventions, and all things that belong to him, or are subject to him." Ambros. de Initiatis. *Ingressus es regenerationis sacramentum, &c.*—"Thou hast entered into the holy place of regeneration; repeat what you were there asked, and recollect what you answered. You renounced the devil, and his works, and his world, and his luxury and pleasures." Hieron. Com. in Matt. xv. 26. *Renuntio tibi diabolo, &c.* "I renounce thee, Satan, and thy pomp, and thy vices, and thy world, which lieth in wickedness." And that we may know what they had particularly in view by the pomps of the world which they renounced, they are sometimes expressly said to be the public shows. Thus Salvian de Provident. lib. 6. page 197. *Quæ est enim in baptismo, &c.* "For what is the first profession of a Christian in baptism? What, but that they profess to renounce the devil, and his pomps, his shows, and his works. Therefore shows and pomps, by our own confession, are the works of the devil. How, O Christian, wilt thou follow the public shows after baptism, which thou confessest to be the works of the devil?"

in Scripture, which require us to maintain an habitual gratitude and thankful frame of spirit, nay, to rejoice in the Lord alway. But there is a great difference between this joy, and that of worldly men; as they do not rise from the same source, so they cannot possibly express themselves in the same way.

Another branch of the Christian temper, between which and theatrical amusements, there appears a very great opposition, is spirituality and heavenliness of mind. All real Christians are, and account themselves pilgrims and strangers on the earth, set their affections on things above, and have their conversation in heaven. Whatever tends to weaken these dispositions, they will carefully avoid, as contrary to their duty and their interest. Is not this the case with theatrical amusements? Are they not very delicious to a sensual and carnal mind? Do they not excite, gratify, and strengthen these affections, which it is most the business of a Christian to restrain? Are not the indulgence of worldly

There are some who pretend, that Christians were only kept from the shows, because they were mixed with idolatrous rites; but it is to be noted, that in the time of Salvian, idolatry was abolished, and the shows were no longer exhibited in honour of idol gods. Cyril of Jerusalem also, after idolatry was destroyed, continues the charge against the shows.

pleasure, and heaviness of mind, mutually destructive of each other? This is so plain, that anciently those who gave themselves up to a life of eminent holiness and piety, used to retire wholly from the commerce of the world and the society of men. Though this was wrong in itself, and soon found to be very liable to superstitious abuse, it plainly shows how much they err upon the opposite side, who being called to wean the affections from the world, do yet voluntarily and unnecessarily indulge themselves in the most delicious and intoxicating pleasures.

What is offered above, I hope, will suffice to show that the stage, considered simply as an entertainment, cannot be lawfully used by a Christian. But we must now proceed in the second place, To consider the modern pretence, that it is useful and instructive; or, to speak in the language of one of its defenders, "A warm incentive to virtue, and powerful preservative against vice." The same author gives us this account of tragedy: "True tragedy is a serious lecture upon our duty, shorter than an epic poem, and longer than a fable, otherwise differing from both only in the method, which is dis-

* Remarks on Anderson's Positions concerning the unlawfulness of stage-plays.

“logue instead of narration; its province is to
“bring us in love with the more exalted virtues,
“and to create a detestation of the blacker and
“(humanly speaking) more enormous crimes.”
On comedy he says, “an insinuating mirth
“laughs us out of our frailties by making us
“ashamed of them. Thus, when they are well
“intended, tragedy and comedy work to one
“purpose, the one manages us as children, the
“other convinces us as men.”

In order to treat this part of the subject with precision, I must beg the reader to recal to mind the account formerly given of what is implied in the stage, even under the best possible regulation; because, unless this be allowed me, I confess the argument to be defective. It is not denied, that there may be, and are to be found, in some dramatic performances, noble and excellent sentiments. These indeed are much fewer than is commonly supposed, as might be shewn by an examination of some of the most celebrated plays. There is a great difference between the shining thoughts that are applauded in the world by men of taste, and the solid and profitable truths of religion. However, it is allowed, that there are some things to be found in plays, against which no just objection can be made; and it is

easy to form an idea of them still more pure than any that do yet exist ; but the question is, Whether it is possible now to find, or reasonable to hope to find, such a number of pieces, in their prevailing tendency, agreeable to the holiness and purity of the Christian character, as are necessary to support a public theatre ? Till this is accomplished, all that is done to support the theatre in the mean time, is done to support the interest of vice and wickedness ; whatever it may be in itself, and singly considered. And if such an entire reformation be impossible, a partial reformation, or mixing a few good things with it, is not only ineffectual, but hurtful. It makes a bad cause a little more plausible, and therefore the temptation so much the more formidable.

There is a discourse of a foreigner of some note, in which he exerts all his eloquence in commendation of plays, when used in the public schools, for the improvement of youth in action and elocution, under the direction of their masters. As this gentleman was a clergyman, his authority is often used on this subject. But it ought to be observed, that as he was a young man when he employed his eloquence in this cause, so, what he says, strongly supports the propriety of the distinction I have laid down.

He expressly confines the argument to such plays as were represented by youths in the schools, and rejects with great abhorrence the public stage, and such as were acted by mercenary players. Of the last sort he hath the following strong words.

“ At hic versor A. ne quis sint inter vos qui ex me
 “ querant: Quid agis adolescens? Tunc comes-
 “ dos, Histriones, mimos, ex eloquentie studiosis
 “ facere paras? Egone? Histriones? Quos? An
 “ viles illos qui in scenam prodeunt mercede con-
 “ ducti? Qui quæstus causa quamlibet personam
 “ induant? Qui passim per urbes vagantes artem
 “ suam venalem habent? Qui, merito, Romano
 “ jure, infamia notantur?—Absit, a me absit,
 “ ut in hac impietatis schola teneros adolescentium
 “ animos eloquentia imbui velim. Quanticum-
 “ que eam facio, tantum tamen non est. Satius es-
 “ set balbutire, imo satius mutum esse, quam
 “ non sine summo animi periculo eloquentiam
 “ discere.” Which passage may be translated
 thus; “ But here I am afraid some of you will
 “ be ready to challenge me, and to say, what is
 “ this you aim at, young man? Do you intend to
 “ make all who study eloquence comedians, play-
 “ ers, buffoons? Do I indeed? What sort of play-
 “ ers? Those contemptible wretches, who are

* Werenfels's Oratio de Comædiis.

“ hired to come upon the stage, and who for gain
“ will personate any character whatever? Who
“ go about through different cities making merchandise of their art? Who are justly marked
“ with infamy in the Roman law?——Far, far be
“ it from me to propose, that the tender minds of
“ youth should be taught eloquence in this school
“ of impiety. However much I value it, I value it not at this rate. Better it were they
“ should stammer in speech, nay, better that
“ they were dumb and incapable of speech, than
“ that they should learn the art of eloquence, by
“ putting their souls in the most imminent danger.” Now, whether this author’s scheme was right or not, I have no occasion at present to debate with him as an adversary, for he rejects with abhorrence the imputation of favoring the cause against which I plead.

When a public theatre is defended as a means of instruction, I cannot help thinking it is of importance to observe, that it is a method altogether uncommanded and unauthorized in the word of God. This will probably appear a very weak argument to many, but it will not appear so to those who have a firm belief of, and a just esteem for that book of life. Such will not expect, that any method will prove effectually to make

men "wise unto salvation," without the blessing of God, and they will hardly be induced to look for this blessing upon the stage. And let it be remembered, that it is now pleaded for in a higher light, and on a more important account, than merely as an amusement, viz. as proper to support the interest of religion; it should therefore have a positive warrant before it be employed in this cause; lest it should meet with the same reception that all other human devices will meet with, "Who hath required these things at your hands?"

And that none may use a delusory sort of reasoning, and shift from one pretence to another, saying, it becomes a lawful amusement by its tendency to instruct, and an effectual instruction by its power to please at the same time; it must be observed, that a sinful amusement is not to be indulged on any pretence whatsoever; for we must not "do evil, that good may come." Nay, call it only a dangerous amusement, even in that case, no pretence of possible or probable instruction (though such a thing were not contrary to the supposition) is sufficient to warrant it. Nothing less than its being necessary, could authorize the practice, and that I hope none will be so hardy as to affirm.

It can never be affirmed to be necessary, with-

out a blasphemous impeachment
wisdom. If the holy scriptures, as
there authorized and appointed, an
sufficient for our spiritual improvement
must be wholly unnecessary. And if
most powerful and the most effectual means, no
others must be suffered to come into rivalry
and competition with them; on the contrary,
they must be condemned as wrong, or laid aside
as comparatively weak. The truth is, the stage
can never be defended on a more untenable foot-
ing, than when it is represented as having a moral
or virtuous, that is to say, a pious or religious
tendency. What Christian can hear such a plea
with patience? Is the "law of the Lord perfect,
"converting the soul? Is it able to make the man
"of God perfect, thoroughly furnished to every
"good work?" What then are its defects which
must be supplied by the theatre? Have the saints
of God, for so many ages, been carried safely
through all the dark and difficult steps of their
earthly pilgrimage, with his law as a "light to
"their feet, and a lamp to their path," and yet
is it now necessary, that they should have addi-
tional illumination from a well regulated stage?
Have there been for so long a time pastors em-
ployed, bearing a divine commission? ordinar-

ess administered according to divine institution? Have these been hitherto effectual for "perfecting the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for edifying the body of Christ?" And shall we not count them among the scoffers that were to come in the last days, who pretend to open a new commission for the players to assist? If any shall say, there needs no divine institution, all men are called to instruct one another, "the lips of the righteous should feed many," and this way of the drama is but a mode of the instruction we all owe to one another. I answer, it is as a mode I attack it. This very mode has been shown to be dangerous, nay sinful, as an amusement; who then can show its necessity, in the same mode, for instruction or improvement? If the stage be a proper method of promoting the interests of religion, then is Satan's kingdom divided against itself, which he is more cunning than to suffer it to be. For whatever debate there be whether good men MAY attend the theatre, there can be no question at all, that no openly vicious man, is an enemy to it, and that the far greatest part of them do passionately love it. I say no OPENLY vicious man; for doubtless there may be some hypocrites wearing the habit of the Christian pilgrim, who are the very worst of men,

and yet may shew abundance of zeal against the stage. But nothing is more certain than, that taking the world according to its appearance, it is the worst part of it that shows most passion for this entertainment, and the best that avoids and fears it, than which there can hardly be a worse sign of it, as a means of doing good. Whoever believes the following words of our blessed Redeemer, will never be persuaded that poets and actors for the stage have received any commission to speak in his name. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, John x. 27.—A stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of strangers." John x. 5.*

* It is to be observed here, to prevent mistakes, that the argument is founded on the general and prevailing inclination of the greatest part of each character, and not upon particular instances, in many of which it is confessed, it will not hold. For, as it is difficult to know the real character of some persons, in whom there are some marks and signs of true religion, and at the same time, some symptoms of unsoundness, so it is still more difficult to determine the quality of single actions. Therefore, it is little or no argument that any practice is safe or good, because one good man, or one supposed to be good, has been known to do it; or on the contrary, ill, because one bad man has been known to do it. But as, when we retire further from the limit that divides them, the characters are more clearly and sensibly distinguished, so, whatever practice is passionately desired by wicked men in general, and shunned by the good, certainly is of bad tendency. If it were otherwise, as said above, "Satan's kingdom would be divided against itself," and the God "who keepeth covenant and truth for ever," would fail in his promise, of "giving" his people "counsel," and "teaching them the way in which they ought to walk."

This leads us to observe, that the stage is not only an improper method of instruction, but that all, or the far greatest number of pieces there represented, must have, upon the whole, a pernicious tendency. This is evident, because they must be to the taste and relish of the bulk of those who attend it. The difficulty of getting good authors for the theatre, I shall not insist upon, but whatever the authors are able or willing to do, it is certain, that their productions in fact can rise no higher in point of purity, than the audience shall be willing to receive. Their attendance is not constrained, but voluntary; may they pay dearly for their entertainment: and therefore they must, and will have it to their taste. This is a part of the subject that merits the particular attention of all who are inclined to judge impartially, and it proves, in the strongest manner, the absurdity of forming chimerical suppositions of a stage so regulated, as, instead of being hurtful, to promote the interest of piety and virtue.

Here let some truths be called to mind which are frequently mentioned in the holy Scriptures, but seldom recollected, and their consequences very little attended to. There is a distinction often stated, both in the old and new Testament,

between the children of God and the men of the world. These are mixed together in the present state, and cannot, in many cases, be certainly distinguished by their outward appearance; yet is there at bottom, not only a real distinction of character, but a perfect opposition between them, as to the commanding principle of all their actions. And as there is an opposition of character between them, so there must be an opposition of interests and views. Our blessed Redeemer, when he came into the world, was "despised and rejected of men;" and he every where tells his disciples, that they must expect no better treatment. Matt. v. 11, 12. "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you." And on the other hand, Luke vi. 26. "Woe unto you when all men shall speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." Again, John xv. 19. "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." His

apostles speak always in the same language ; thus the apostle Paul, Rom. xii. 2. " And be not conformed to this world." Nay, he lays it down as an universal position, 2 Tim. iii. 12. " Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Now I ask, Whether those who have a strong and rooted aversion to true holiness, which is not the character of the sincere Christian, will voluntarily crowd to the theatre, to hear and see such performances as breathe nothing but what is agreeable to the pure and uncorrupted word of God ? Will those who revile, injure, and persecute the saints themselves, delight in the stage, if honor is there put upon true religion, and be pleased with that character in the representation which they hate in the original ? This would be to expect impossibilities. And therefore, while the great majority of those who attend the stage are unholy, it is certain, that the plays which they behold with pleasure, cannot, upon the whole, but have a criminal tendency.

If any allege, that the poet's art may be a means to make religion amiable to them, I answer, that he cannot make it amiable, but by adulteration, by mixing it with something agreeable to their own taste ; and then it is not religion

that they admire, but the erroneous, debased, and false resemblance of it. Or even supposing, that, in a single instance or two, nothing in substance should be set before them but true religion, and this dressed to the very highest advantage by the poet's genius and actor's skill, there would be little gained: because these human arts only would be the object of their admiration, and they would always prefer, and speedily procure, a display of the same arts, upon a subject more agreeable to their corrupt minds. This indeed, we are not left to gather by way of inference and deduction from other truths, but are expressly taught it in the word of God. For "the natural
" man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of
" God: for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." 1 Cor. ii. 14. Experience is a strong proof of this. For if any man will take the pains of making up a system of the morality of the stage, I do not mean the horrid profanity, and scandalous obscenity, that is to be found in the worst, but of that which is called virtue in the best of the pieces wrote for the theatre, he will find it exceeding different from Christian morals; and, that an adherence to it would be, in most instances, a wilful departure from the rules of a holy life.

However plainly this is founded upon the word of God, and sound reason, there are some very unwilling to think, that ever their duty as Christians should constrain them to be at odds with the delicacies of life, or the polite and fashionable pleasures of the age. And, as the mind of man is very ingenious in the defence of that pollution which it loves, they sometimes bring in criticism to their aid. They allege, that by the "world" is understood, generally through the New Testament, those who were heathens by profession ; and that the same opposition to true religion, in judgment and heart, is not to be ascribed to those who are members of the visible church. It is answered, the word did indeed signify as they say, for this plain reason, that in the early days of Christianity, when it was under persecution, few or none would make profession of it, unless they did really believe it. But is not the meaning still the same ? Can we suppose that the hatred of the then world, was at the name of religion only, and not at the substance ? Was the devil "the prince of this world," then ? and has he not now equal dominion over, and is he not equally served by those who are profane in their lives, though they were once baptised ? Was he the spirit that

"then worked," and is he not the spirit that "now works," in the children of disobedience? The truth therefore remains still the same, those who are in a natural and unregenerate state, who hate true religion in their hearts, must have something very different before they can be pleased with seeing it on the stage.*

That this argument may have its proper force, we ought to consider, how great a proportion of persons under the dominion of vice and wickedness there must always be among those who attend the theatre. The far greatest number of the world in general are ungodly. This is a fact

* There is an excellent passage to this purpose in an essay against plays, to be found in one of the volumes published about a hundred years ago, by the gentlemen of the Port-Royal in France, a society of Jansenists, of great parts and eminent piety. This essay in particular, is by some said to have been written by the prince of Conti. Section 15th of that essay, he says, "It is so true that
" plays are almost always a representation of vicious pas-
" sions, that the most part of Christian virtues are inea-
" pable of appearing upon the stage. Silence, patience,
" moderation, wisdom, poverty, repentance, are no vir-
" tues, the representation of which can divert the specta-
" tors; and above all, we never hear humility spoken of,
" and the bearing of injuries. It would be strange to see
" a modest and silent religious person represented. There
" must be something great and renowned according to
" men, or at least something lively and animated, which
" is not met withal in Christian gravity and wisdom; and
" therefore those who have been desirous to introduce
" holy men and women upon the stage, have been forced
" to make them appear proud, and to make them utter
" discourses more proper for the ancient Roman heroes,
" than for saints and martyrs. Their devotion upon the
" stage ought also to be always a little extraordinary."

which could hardly be denied, even though the following passage had not stood in the oracles of truth. "Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide
" is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth
" to destruction, and many there be which go in
" therent: Because strait is the gate, and narrow
" is the way that leadeth unto life, and few there
" be that find it." Matt. vii. 13, 14. And as none can attend the stage, but those in higher life, and more affluent circumstances than the bulk of mankind, there is still a greater proportion of them who are enemies to pure and undefiled religion. Thus, says our Saviour to his disciples, "Verily I say unto you, that a rich-man
" shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.
" And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for
" a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Matt. xix. 23, 24. To the same purpose the apostle Paul says, "Ye see your calling, brethren,
" how that not many wise men after the flesh,
" not many mighty, not many noble are called." 1 Cor. i. 26. This does not at all suppose, that those in high life are originally more corrupt in their nature than others, but it arises from their being exposed to much greater and stronger temptations. Now, if from the small number

of real Christians in the upper ranks of life, we again subtract such as count the stage unlawful or dangerous, or have no inclination to it, there will very few remain of those who are "the salt of the earth," to season the unhallowed assembly. What sort of productions then must they be, which shall have the approbation of such judges? How much more proper to pollute than to reform, to poison than to cure? If such in fact the great bulk of plays have always hitherto been, from what has been said, it ought not to be wondered at, because it cannot be otherwise.

It is very possible, that some may be all this while holding the argument very cheap, and saying with lord Shaftesbury, "The true genius is
" of a nobler nature than servilely to submit to
" the corrupt or vitiated taste of any age or place;
" —he works not for gain, but despises it;—he
" knows, and will not swerve from the truth of
" art; he will produce what is noble and excellent
" in its kind;—he will refine the public ear, and
" teach them to admire in the right place." These, though I do not cite any particular passage, are all of them sentiments, and most of them expressions, of that author so much admired among modern philosophers.—But the objection is easily solved. The observation is allowed to be just,

but with the concurrence of the Spirit and grace of God. In this he has given no authority to the players to act under him, nay, he has expressly told us, that he will not ordinarily, in any way whatever, make use of the perfection of human art, but of the plainest and weakest outward means. Thus the Apostle Paul tells us his Master sent him, "to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." 1 Cor. i. 17. And, "after that in the wisdom of God, The world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." 1 Cor. i. 21. He also professes that his practice had always been conformed to this rule, "And I brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God." 1 Cor. ii. 1. "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."* 1 Cor. ii. 4, 5.

* Perhaps some will ask here, Is then human art, and are natural talents, which are the gifts of God, wholly excluded from his service? I answer, they are not. And

It may be necessary here to obviate an objection, that in the holy Scriptures themselves we find several passages which seem to signify that true religion, though it is not the choice of all men, is yet the object of universal approbation. Thus we are told, that "the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance, but the memory of the wicked shall rot." Nay, we are exhorted by the apostle Paul to the practice of our duty in such terms as these, "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things." But these must surely be explained in such a manner, as to be consistent with the clear and strong

yet the instances of their being eminently useful are exceeding rare. Such is the imperfection of the human mind, that it can hardly at the same time, give great attention and application to two distinct subjects; and therefore, when men give that intense application to human art, which is necessary to bring it to its perfection, they are apt to overlook the power and grace of God, without which all art is vain and ineffectual. Agreeably to this, when men of eminent talents have been of service in religion, it has been commonly by the exercise of self-denial, by making a very sparing and moderate use of them, and shewing themselves so deeply penetrated with a sense of the important truths of the everlasting gospel, as to despise the beauties and embellishments of human skill, to give an attention to which is evidently inconsistent with the other. Well, say refined observers, this is the very perfection of art to use it with great reserve, and to keep it out of view as much as possible. And it is indeed the perfection of art to have the appearance of this, but it is peculiar to a renewed heart to have it in reality.

passages mentioned above; which it is not difficult to do. The matter of many good actions, particularly social virtues, the duties of the second table of the law, wicked men do often approve, nay, they may not only see some beauty, but feel some pleasure in them, from natural, though unsanctified affections leading to them. But truly good actions, instances of holy obedience to God, in their manner, and in the principles from which they ought to flow, they neither can approve nor perform.

Nothing can be done agreeable to the will of God, but what hath the following properties. It must be done from a sense, not only of the unalterable obligation, but the perfect excellence of the law of God, Rom. vii. 12. renouncing all pretence of merit in the actor, Gal. ii. 20. Phil. iii. 8.; depending for assistance entirely on divine strength, John xv. 5.; and with a single eye to the divine glory, 1 Cor. x. 31. 1 Pet. iv. 11. It is not the matter of an action that renders it truly holy, but the prevalence of these principles in the heart of the performer. And they are so far from being generally approved, that they are hated and despised, and the very profession of most of them at least, ridiculed by every worldly man. The truth is, it is not easy to discover

these principles otherwise than by narration. They lie deep in the heart, they do not seek to discover themselves, and the shewing them on the stage would be a sort of contradiction to their nature. I believe it would exceed the art of most poets or actors, to exhibit by outward signs, true self-denial, without joining to it such ostentation, as would destroy its effect. Or if it could be done, it would be so far from being delightful to those who "through the pride of their heart will not seek after God," that it would fill them with disgust or disdain. So that all friends of the stage ought to join with David Hume, who hath excluded self-denial, humility, and mortification, from the number of the virtues, and ranked them among the vices.

From this it appears, that worldly men will bear a form of godliness, but the spirit and power of it they cannot endure. When therefore, the Scriptures represent religion, or any part of it, as amiable in the eyes of mankind in general, it is only giving one view of its excellence in itself or in its matter: but this can never be intended to make the judgment of bad men its standard or measure. And when the approbation of men is proposed as an argument to duty, it cannot be considered in any other light, than as an assistant

subordinate motive to preserve us from its violation ; for the Scriptures will never warrant us to aim at the praise of men, as the reward of our compliance.

If there be any more than what is said above in the testimony which wicked men give in favor of religion, it is but the voice of natural conscience, that is, the voice of God in them, and not their own ; and as it is extorted from them against their will, they do all in their power to destroy the force of the evidence. This we may be sensible of, if we will recollect, that it is always general, and that many speak well of something which they call religion in general, when yet there is hardly any of the servants of God, in whose character and conduct they will not endeavor either to find or make a flaw. The truth is, though some few heroes in profanity vilify religion in itself directly, and in all its parts, the plurality of scoffers only tell you, this and the other thing is not religion, but superstition, preciseness, fancy or whim, and so on. But at the same time, if you take away all that by some or other is reflected on under these appellations, you will leave little behind. Which plainly teaches us this truth, that no man will cordially approve of such a scheme of religion as he does not believe and embrace, or inwardly and with-

out dissimulation applaud a character that is better than his own: at least, than his own either is, or he falsely presumes it to be.* For this reason, the apostle John gives it as a mark or evidence of regeneration, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren;" that is to say, a sincere and prevalent love to a saint as such, can dwell in no heart but that which is sanctified.

* For ascertaining the sense, and confirming the truth of this passage, it is proper to observe, That by the word [better] is not so much to be understood higher in degree, as different in kind. Though even in the first sense it seems to hold pretty generally in comparisons between man and man. Men commonly extend their charity to those who have less, and not to those who have more goodness than themselves. They are very few, who, when they see others more strict and regular in their conduct than they are willing to be, do not ascribe it either to wickedness or hypocrisy. Perhaps indeed, the reason of this may be, that a gradual difference as to the actions done, is considered as constituting a specific difference in the moral character; and men condemn others not for being better than themselves, upon their own notion of goodness, but for placing religion in the extremes, which they apprehend ought to be avoided. This confirms the remark made above, that every man's own character is the standard of his approbation, and shows at the same time its inconsistency with that humility which is essential to every christian. Wherever there is a real approbation, and sincere confession of superior worth, there is also an unfeigned imitation of it. The christian not only knows himself to be infinitely distant from God, whom yet he supremely loves, but thinks himself less than the least of all saints; but he could neither love the one nor the other, if he had not a real, however distant likeness; if he had not the seeds of every good disposition implanted in him, the growth of which is his supreme desire, and the improvement of which is the constant object of his care and diligence.

It will be proper here to take notice, because it has some relation to this subject of what the advocates of the stage often make their boast; that before a polished audience things grossly criminal are not suffered to be acted ; and that it is one of the rules of the drama, that, if such things be supposed, they must be kept behind the scenes. We are often put in mind of the pure taste of an Athenian audience, who, upon one of the actors expressing a profane thought, all rose up and left the theatre. A famous French tragedian, Corneille, also takes notice of it as an evidence of the improvement of the stage in his time, that one of his best written pieces had not succeeded, " Because it struck the spectators with the horrid idea of a prostitute, to which a holy woman had been condemned." As to the case of the Athenians, it were easy to show from the nature and circumstances of the fact, that this resentment at the profanity of the poet, though it was expressed in the theatre, was by no means learned there. But it is needless to enter into any nice disquisition upon this subject, for all that follows from any such instances, is, that there are some things so very gross and shocking, that, as but a few of the most abandoned will commit them, so the rest of the world can have no delight in beholding them. There is, no doubt, a

great variety of characters differing one from another in the degree of their degeneracy, and yet all of them essentially distinct from true piety.

To set this matter in a just light, we must remember, that, as has been confessed above, the matter of many good actions, or a defective imperfect form of virtue is approved by the generality of the world ; and, that they are very much swayed in their actions by a view to public praise. Therefore, they are mutually checks to one another, and vice is not seen on a theatre in a gross, but commonly in a more dangerous, because an engaging and insinuating form. The presence of so many witnesses does restrain and disguise sin, but cannot change its nature, or render it innocent. The purity of the theatre can never be carried farther by the taste of the audience, than what is required in conversation with the polite and fashionable world. There vice is in some measure restrained ; men may be wicked, but they must not be rude. How much this amounts to is but too well known ; it is no more than that we must not disgust those with whom we converse, and varies with their character. This is so far from being agreeable to the rules of the gospel, that a serious Christian is often obliged, from a sense of duty, to be

guilty of a breach of good manners, by administering unacceptable reproof.

Thus it appears that, in the stage, the audience gives law to the poet, which is much the thing as the scholar chusing his own lesson; whether this be a safe or profitable method of instruction, is easy to judge. Every one knows human nature, especially who believe in the representation given of it in scripture, must conclude, that the young will be seduced into commission, and the older confirmed and hardened in the practice of sin; because characters fundamentally wrong, will be there painted in an amiable light, and divested of what is shameful and shocking. By this means science, instead of being alarmed, and giving full testimony, is deceived and made a party to the cause. In short, vice in the theatre must in the garb, assume the name, and claim the reward of virtue.

How strong a confirmation of this have we from experience? Have not plays in fact commonly turned upon the characters most graceful and the events most interesting to corrupt the mind? Pride, under the name of greatness of mind, ambition and revenge, under those of heroism, have been their constant sub-

But chiefly love : this, which is the strongest passion, and the most dangerous in the human frame, and from which the greatest number of crimes, and crimes the most atrocious, have sprung, was always encouraged upon the stage. There, women are swelled with vanity, by seeing their sex deified and adored ; there men learn the language, as well as feel by sympathy, the transports of that passion ; and there the hearts of both are open and unguarded to receive the impression, because it is covered with a mask of honor. Hath this then been only the case at particular times of occasionall corruption, or for want of a proper regulation of the stage ? No, it is inseparable from its constitution. Such hath been the nature and tendency of plays in all former ages, and such, from the taste and disposition of those who attend them, it is certain they will for ever continue to be.*

* Perhaps it will be alleged, that the whole force of this reasoning may be evaded, by supposing a stage directed by the magistrate, and supported at the public charge. In this case the performers would be under no temptation, for gain, to gratify the taste of the audience, and the managers would have quite a different intention. It is confessed, that this supposition seems considerably to weaken the arguments above used, though perhaps more in theory than it would do in practice. But I would ask any who make such a supposition, why this inviolable attachment to the stage ? Why must so many efforts be made to preserve it in some shape or other ? What are its mighty benefits, that it must be forced as it were, out of its own nat-

Another argument, which shows the stage to be an improper method of instruction, or that it is pernicious and hurtful, may be drawn from its own nature. In its most improved state, it is a picture of human life, and

an immoral course in order to make it lawful, rather than give it up as pernicious!—It is also to be observed, however useful an ordinance of God, magistracy, public order, there is very little security in the direction of magistrates, for sound and wholesome instruction in religion or morals. We can never depend upon them for this, unless they are themselves persons of true piety and not always even when that is the case, because they may be guilty of many errors in judgment. Now it is reasonable to hope, that magistrates in any country will be always, or even generally, persons of true piety with the other qualifications necessary to magistracy, but not always to be found. Neither is there any security for it; because, though doubtless, those who fear God will be the most faithful magistrates, and the most diligent in their duties, yet the greatest part of the duties of both are performed without this, in a manner in which they will see and feel very little difference. Magistrates show only the outward carriage, and not the heart for its influence, and it is the sensible effect which the public look at, and not the principle from which any thing is done. Therefore, as on the one hand, if a subject obeys the law and outwardly fulfils the duties of his station, the magistrate hath nothing farther to demand, though it be for “wrath” and not “for conscience sake;” so on the other, if a magistrate be diligent in preserving order and promoting the general good, though the motive of his actions be no better than vanity, ambition, or the fear of man well concealed, the public reaps the benefit, and there is no ground of complaint, even whilst his character is vile in the sight of God. But this magistrate can not safely intrusted with the direction of what regards civil and spiritual improvement, and he would be going out of his own sphere should he attempt it.—After all, it makes little difference whether the magistrate or an actor directs the stage, while the attendance is voluntary; for in that case, it must either be suited to the taste of the audience, or it will be wholly deserted.

represent characters as they really are. An author for the stage is not permitted to feign, but to paint and copy. Though he should introduce things or persons ever so excellent, if there were not discerned a resemblance between them and real life, they would be so far from being applauded, that they would not be suffered, but would be condemned, as a transgression of the fundamental rules of the art. Now, are not the great majority of characters in real life bad? Must not the greatest part of those represented on the stage be bad? And therefore must not the strong impression which they make upon the spectators be hurtful in the same proportion?

It is a known truth, established by the experience of all ages, that bad example has a powerful and unhappy influence upon human characters. Sin is of a contagious and spreading nature, and the human heart is but too susceptible of the infection. This may be ascribed to several causes, and to one in particular which is applicable to the present case, that the seeing of sin frequently committed, must gradually abate that horror which we ought to have of it upon our minds, and which serves to keep us from yielding to its solicitations. Frequently seeing the most terrible objects renders them familiar

to our view, and makes us behold them with less emotion. And from seeing sin without reluctance, the transition is easy, to a compliance with its repeated importunity, especially as there are latent remaining dispositions to sinning in every heart that is but imperfectly sanctified. It will be difficult to assign any other reason, why wickedness is always carried to a far greater height in large and populous cities, than in the country. Do not multitudes, in places of great resort, come to perpetrate, calmly and sedately, without any remorse, such crimes as would surprise a less knowing sinner so much as to hear of? Can it then be safe, to be present at the exhibition of so many vicious characters as always must appear upon the stage? Must it not, like other examples, have a strong, though insensible influence, and indeed the more strong, because unperceived.

Perhaps some will say, This argument draws very deep, it is a reproaching of Providence, and finding fault with the order which God hath appointed, at least permitted, to take place in the world, where the very same proportion of wicked characters is to be seen. But is there not a wide difference between the permission of any thing by a wise, holy, and just God, or its ma-

king part of the plan of providence, and our presuming to do the same thing, without authority, and when we can neither restrain it within proper bounds, nor direct it to its proper end? There are many things which are proper and competent to God, which it would be the most atrocious wickedness in man to imitate. Because it is both good and just in God to visit us with sickness, or to take us away by death when he sees it proper, would it therefore be lawful in us, to bring any of them upon ourselves at our own pleasure? I should rather be inclined to think, that these sportive representations on the stage, instead of being warranted by their counterpart in the world, are a daring profanation, and as it were, a mockery of divine Providence, and so to be considered in a light yet more dreadful, than any in which they have been hitherto viewed. Besides, it ought to be remembered that, though evil actions, as permitted, make a part of the will of God, yet hitherto, all who deserve the name of Christians have affirmed, that what is sinful in any action is to be ascribed to the will of the creature as its adequate cause; and therefore, exhibiting human actions and characters upon the stage, is not only representing the works of God, but repeating the sins of men.

The criminal and dangerous nature of such a conduct will farther appear from this, that it is by just and necessary consequence forbidden in the word of God. There we find, that though in his sovereign providence he permits the commission of sin, suffers his own people to continue mixed with sinners in this state, and makes their connexion with them in some measure unavoidable, as a part of their trial, yet he hath expressly prohibited them from having any more communication with such, than he himself hath made necessary. We are warned in Scripture, that "evil communications corrupt good manners," and therefore, that we must fly the society of the ungodly. The Psalmist tell us, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful," Psal. i. 1. Agreeably to this the characters of good men in Scripture are always represented. Thus the Psalmist David records his own resolution, "I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes, I hate the work of them that turn aside, it shall not cleave to me. A froward heart shall depart from me, I will not know a wicked person," Psal. ci. 3, 4. The same say elsewhere, "I am a companion of all them that

"fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts,"
Psal. cxix. 63 — "Depart from me ye evil do-
ers, for I will keep the commandments of my
"God." ver. 115.

But there is no need of citing passages of Scripture to this purpose ; it is well known, that good men, though they will be very cautious of rashly determining characters that are doubtful, and will far less discover a proud and pharisaical contempt of any who may yet be vessels of mercy, will however, carefully avoid all unnecessary communication with sinners. They will neither follow their persons from inclination, nor view their conduct with pleasure. On the contrary, when they cannot wholly fly from their society, it becomes a heavy burthen, and in some cases intolerable, and so as to require the interposition of the same kind Providence that "delivered
"just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of
"the wicked." Is there any consistency between such a character, and attending the stage with delight ? Will those who "behold transgres-
"sors, and are grieved," crowd with eagerness to the theatre, where the same persons and actions are brought under review ? Will what affected them with sorrow in the commission, be voluntarily chosen, and made subservient to their pleasure in the repetition ?

I cannot help here calling to mind the anxious concern which wise and pious parents usually shew for their children, on account of the snares to which they are unavoidably exposed in an evil world. How carefully do they point out, and how solemnly do they charge them to shun the paths in which destroyers go. They use this caution with respect to the world, even as under the government of God ; and in so doing they follow the example of their Saviour, who, in the prospect of leaving his disciples, after many excellent advices, puts up for them this intercessory prayer ; “ And now I am no more in this world, “ but these are in the world, and I am come to “ thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own “ name those whom thou hast given me, that they “ may be one as we are.—I pray not that thou “ shouldst take them out of the world, but that “ thou shouldst keep them from the evil,” John xvii. 11, 15. Can any expect that this prayer will be heard in their behalf, who are not content with seeing the world as it is ordered by a wise and holy God, but must see it over again, in a vile imitation, by a sinful man.

It will probably be said, that this strikes as much against history, at least the writing and reading of human, commonly called, profane his-

tory, as against the writing and seeing of dramatic representations. But the cases are by no means the same; the knowledge of history is, in many respects, necessary for the great purposes of religion.—Were not this the case, there would be little difficulty in admitting the consequence. Perhaps, even as it is, it had been better for the world that several ancient facts and characters, which now stand upon record, had been buried in oblivion*. At any rate it may be safely affir-

* Perhaps some will be surprised at what is here said on the subject of history, who have not usually viewed it in this light. And indeed this is the great difficulty in the whole of the present argument, to overcome strong prepossessions, and to shew men the sin and danger of a practice which they know to be common, and have been long accustomed to look upon as lawful and safe. For this reason, it is probable, that the best way of proving that the above assertion on the subject of history, is agreeable to Scripture and reason, will be by a case perfectly similar, but more frequently handled. Do not all Christian writers, without exception, who treat of the government of the tongue, lay down this as a rule, that we are not to report the sins of others, though we know the truth of the facts, unless where it is necessary to some good end? Now why should there be any different rule in writing, than in conversation? What is done either way, is the same in substance, viz. communicating information; and writing, which may be called visible speech, is much more lasting in its nature and extensive in its effects. If any ask, How or why the knowledge of history is necessary to the purposes of religion? I answer, it is necessary for proving the truths of natural and confirming those of revealed religion, for repelling the attacks of adversaries, and giving us such a view of the plan of providence, as may excite us to the exercise of the duties of adoration, thankfulness, trust, and submission to the supreme Disposer of all events. Real facts only are proper for this purpose, and

well, that romances and fabulous narrations are a species of composition, from which the v bath received as little benefit, and as much as any that can be named, excepting plays themselves, to which they are so nearly allied. first are only exceeded by the last, as to the capacity of doing mischief, by the circumstances of action, and the presence at once of so many persons, among whom by mutual sympathy spiritual poison spreads faster and penetrates deeper.

Lest it should be pretended that such a is given to things in the representation, as though the greatest part of the actions represented are ill in themselves, yet vice is reproved or ridiculed, virtue set upon a throne, rewarded and honored: let it be called to mind that, as has been shewn above, the author is not left at liberty to do in this as he pleases. He must gain the public taste, and the rules he is obliged to serve, have rather the contrary effect. For he must divest his bad characters of what is horrid and shocking, and present them less deformed than they really are. Besides, the

not feigned stories, in the choice and dressing of which experience teaches us, the great end is, that man be reformed, and not that God may be glorified.

he may conceal a part, he must not alter nature so far as he goes, but take it as he finds it. Accordingly some of our modern critics tell us, that there ought to be no particular moral in a dramatic performance, because that is a departure from nature, and so not in taste.

It ought not to be forgotten, that attending dramatic representations is not only seeing a great plurality of bad characters without necessity, and seeing them with patience, but it is seeing them with pleasure. Whether or not entertainment be yielded to be the only or ultimate effect of plays, surely it cannot be denied to be one effect sought and expected from them, and from every part of them. An actor is as much applauded, and gives as much pleasure to the spectators, when he represents a bad character to the life, as a good. Is there no danger then, that a heart softened by delight, should be more liable to infection from evil than at other times? Is there no danger that an association should be formed in the mind, between the sense of pleasure and the commission of sin? Will any person affirm, that in such circumstances he feels that holy indignation against sin, which every Christian ought to conceive upon seeing it com-

mitted? Or, that he is able to preserve awe and fear, which he ought to have of the judgment of God, when he sees the crimes merit it boldly re-acted, and finely mimicked personated character.

So far is this from being the case, that a person attending the representation of a person enters in some measure himself, as well as actors, into the spirit of each character, and more so the better the action is performed. His attention is strongly fixed, his affections are moved and carried away, and a total forgetfulness of every thing takes place, except what is immediately before him. Can the various passions so strongly excited as they are sometimes known to be, and no effect remain? Will not the passion of love, for example, after it has been strongly felt by the spectator in sympathy with the actor, be a little more ready to recur, especially a future prompts, and various soliciting objects daily presented to his eye? The author terminates his plot as he sees best, and draws what conclusions he thinks proper from his characters; but he has no reason to think that he can control the passions which he raises in the spectators in the same manner, and not suffer the

exceed the bounds of his description. Will not the passion of revenge, that right hand of false greatness of mind, after it has been strongly excited in the theatre, be apt to rise again upon every real or supposed provocation? Some learned observers of nature tell us, that every passion we feel causes a new modification of the blood and spirits; if there is any truth in this, then every passion excited in the theatre takes possession for a time of the very animal frame, makes a seat to itself, and prepares for a speedy return.

Having thus endeavored to show, that the stage, whether amusement or instruction be aimed at in it, cannot be attended by any Christian without sin; there is a third general argument against it, which merits consideration. It is, that no person can contribute to the encouragement of the stage, without being partaker of the sins of others. This is proper to be attended to, as it is against a public theatre that the arguments in this essay are chiefly levelled; so that, if it be criminal at all, every person attending it, is not only faulty by his own proper conduct, but is farther chargeable with the guilt of seducing others. Besides, without this the argument, to some, would not be altogether complete, for after all that has been advanced, there may be a

few, who in a good measure yield it to be and yet have another subterfuge remain. They acknowledge, perhaps, that it is a hazardous amusement, to which others ordinarily to be preferred: That the bulk of will, much more probably, pollute than in the far greatest part of those who attend. Yet still they are apt to figure to themselves particular cases as exceptions from the general and to suppose, there are some plays which be attended, or at least, that there are some persons, who have so much clearness of judgment and so much constancy in virtue, as to separate the corn from the chaff. At a particular they suppose, a person of this kind may, without receiving any hurt, be improved by the sentiments contained in plays: and also something to be applied to other purposes that force and justness of action, that grace and beauty of behaviour, which is no where so great perfection as on the stage.

Upon this subject in general, it may be met, that those who have this confidence in the strength of their own virtue, are far from the persons who may be most safely trusted in place of danger. On the contrary, those probably be most truly steadfast, when ex-

to temptation, who are most diffident of themselves, and do not wantonly run into it. Yet, since some may take encouragement from such apprehensions, it is proper to observe that, though there were truth in their pretence, yet would it not therefore be lawful for them to attend the theatre. They could not do so without contributing to the sins of others, a thing expressly prohibited in the holy Scriptures, and indeed diametrically opposite to the two principal branches of true religion, concern for the glory of God, and compassion to the souls of men.

There are two ways in which the occasional attending of plays, by those who are of good character, even supposing it not hurtful to themselves, contributes to the sins of others. (1.) By supporting the players in that unchristian occupation. (2.) Encouraging, by their example, those to attend all plays indiscriminately, who are in most danger of infection.

First, it contributes to support the players in an unchristian occupation. After what has been said above, and which I now take for granted, on the impropriety of plays as an amusement, and the impossibility of furnishing a stage with nothing but sound and wholesome productions, little doubt can remain, that the occupation of

players is inconsistent with the character of a Christian. Whatever occasional presence may be to some spectators, continual performing can never be lawful to the actors. On the very supposition, it is a life of perpetual amusement which is equally contrary to reason and religion. It is a mean prostitution of the rational powers to have no higher end in view, than to contribute to the pleasure and entertainment of the part of mankind, and instead of taking advantage with the moderation of a Christian, to make it the very business and employment of life. How strange a character does it make one to live, in a manner, perpetually in a personated character? And yet this is the case with all actors, if to the time spent in the representation you add that which is necessary to prepare for their public appearances. What foul pollutions must these be, which are such a receptacle of foreign vanities, besides their own natural corruption, and where one system or principle of folly is obliterated only to make way for another.

But the life of players is not only idle and vain, and therefore inconsistent with the character of a Christian, but it is still more directly

and grossly criminal. We have seen above, that not only from the taste of the audience, the prevailing tendency of all successful plays must be bad, but that in the very nature of the thing, the greatest part of the characters represented must be vicious. What then is the life of a player? It is wholly spent in endeavoring to express the language, and exhibit a perfect picture of the passions of vicious men. For this purpose they must strive to enter into the spirit, and feel the sentiments proper to such characters. Unless they do so, the performance will be quite faint and weak, if not wholly faulty and unnatural. And can they do this so frequently without retaining much of the impression, and at last becoming in truth what they are so often in appearance? Do not the characters of all men take a tincture from their employment and way of life? How much more must theirs be infected, who are conversant, not in outward occupations, but in characters themselves, the actions, passions, and affections of men? If their performances touch the audience so sensibly, and produce in them so lasting an effect, how much more must the same effects take place in themselves, whose whole time is spent in this manner?

This is so certain, and at the same time acknowledged a truth, that even those who are the fondest of theatrical amusements, do yet notwithstanding esteem the employment of players a mean and sordid profession. Their character has been infamous in all ages, just a living example of that vanity, obscenity, and impiety which is to be found in the pieces which they represent. As the world has been polluted by the stage, they have always been more eminently so, it is natural to suppose, being the very cistern in which this pollution is collected, and from which it is distributed to others. It makes no difference in the argument, that we must here suppose the stage to be regulated and improved, if it hath been shewn, that it can never be so regulated as to be safe for the spectators, it must always be worse for the actors, between whom and the audience the same proportion will still remain. Can it then be lawful in any to contribute, in the least degree, to support men in an unhallowed employment? Is not the truth truly and essentially, what it has been called rhetorically, the school of impiety, where it is their very business to learn wickedness? Will a Christian, upon any pretended advantage to himself, join in this confederacy against

and assist in endowing and upholding the dreadful seminary ?

Secondly, men of good character going occasionally to the theatre, contribute to the sins of others, by emboldening those to attend all plays indiscriminately, who are in most danger of infection. If there be any at all, especially if there be a great number, to whom the stage is noxious and sinful, every one without exception is bound to abstain. The apostle Paul expressly commands the Corinthians to abstain from lawful things, when their using them would make their brother to offend, that is to say would lead him into sin. “ But take heed, lest by any means, “ this liberty of yours become a stumbling block “ to them that are weak. For if any man see “ thee which hast knowledge, sit at meat in the “ idols temple, shall not the conscience of him “ that is weak, be emboldened to eat those things “ which are offered to idols ? And through thy “ knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for “ whom Christ died. But when ye sin so against “ the brethren, and wound their weak consci- “ ence, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore if meat “ make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh “ while the world standeth, lest I make my bro- “ ther to offend,” 1 Cor. viii. 9—13.

There are many who seem to have entirely got that this precept is to be found in the will of God, and discover not the least sense of obligation to comply with it. If by any plausible pretences they imagine they can vindicate their conduct with regard to themselves, or palliate it with excuses, they are quite unmindful of the injury which they do to others. I speak here of offending, in the sense in which the word is commonly, though unjustly taken, as displeasing others. Such as are displeased with the conduct of those who attend the theatre, because they esteem it to be sinful, are thereby offended in the Scripture sense of the word, except so far as some few of them are provoked to unchristian resentment, or inclined to draw rash and general conclusions, from the indiscretion of particular persons, to the practice of whole orders of men. But vast multitudes are truly offended, or made to offend, when they are led into a practice, which, whatever may be to those who set the example, is undoubtedly pernicious to them. Is it possible to suppose that under the best regulation of the theatre, which can reasonably be hoped for, to great numbers it must be hurtful, especially as it is enticing to all? And, if that be but allowed, persons

character and reputation cannot attend without contributing to the mischief that is done.

Perhaps it will be objected to this application of the passage of scripture cited above, that the particular danger there pointed out by the apostle, is inducing men to venture upon a practice with a doubting conscience. I think it highly probable, that this very precise case happens with many, who go to the theatre following the example of others. They are not entirely satisfied of its lawfulness, they still have some inward reluctance of mind, but adventure to gratify a carnal inclination, being emboldened by the example of those who are esteemed men of understanding and worth. But even where their implicit trust is so strong as fully to satisfy them, and set their minds at ease, the apostle's argument holds with equal force, if thereby they are unavoidably led into sin.

This will probably be looked upon as a very hard law, and it will be asked, Is a man then never to do any thing that he has reason to believe will be misinterpreted, or abused by others to their own hurt? The hardness of the law will wholly vanish, if we remember, that it is confined to things indifferent in their nature.

In duties binding of their own nature, we under no obligation to pay any regard to opinions of others, or the consequences of conduct upon them. But in things originally indifferent, which become duties, or not, chiefly on account of their consequences, we are to beware of making our brother offend. The scripture rule is this, We must not commit the least sin under pretence of the important end, though it were to save multitudes from sins incomparably more heinous. But in matters of indifference, we are not to value the most beloved enjoyment so highly as to endanger the salvation of one soul by using it into sin. And can a real believer have the smallest objection, the least rising the objection against this equitable law? Shall we value present gratification equally, nay, shall we put it in the balance with the spiritual interest of an immortal soul? Now, who will be so senseless as to assert, that attending a public stage to him a necessary duty? Or what defender the stage will be so sanguine as to affirm, that it is, or that he hopes to see it regulated so as to be safe or profitable to every mind? and yet that is the case, it evidently stands condemned by apostolic rule.

Since writing the above, I have met with a pamphlet just published, entitled, *The morality of Stage-plays seriously considered.* This author convinces me, that I have without sufficient ground supposed, that nobody would affirm attending plays to be a necessary duty; for he has either done it, or gone so very near it, that probably the next author upon the same side will do it in plain terms, and assert, that all above the station of tradesmen who do not go to the play-house, are living in the habitual neglect of their duty, and sinning grievously against God. If this looks ridiculous it is none of my fault; for I speak it seriously: and it is a much more natural consequence from his reasoning, than any he has drawn from it himself.

He considers the passage of the apostle Paul, and says (which is true) that it holds only in the case of indifferent actions, but that we are to "do good in the face of prejudice." The way in which he shews it to be doing good, is pretty singular, but I pass it by for a little, and observe, that probably he is not much accustomed to commenting on such passages of scripture; for even granting his unreasonable supposition, doing good indefinitely is not opposed to indifferent actions in this, or any similar case. An action

that is good in itself, is indifferent when it be exchanged for another; when one as good or better, may be put in its place. Nothing is opposed to indifferent actions here, but what is indispensably necessary, and absolutely binding both in itself, and in its circumstances. And indeed, though he is afraid at first to say so, he seems to carry the matter that length at last, making his conclusion a little broader than the premises, and saying in the close of the paragraph upon that subject, "What they do to this purpose, either in opposing the bad, or promoting the good, is MATTER OF DUTY, and their conduct in it is not to be regulated by the opinion of any person who is pleased to take fence."*

But how shall we refute this new and wonderful doctrine, of its being necessary that men should attend the theatre? I cannot think of a better way of doing it, than tearing some of the drapery of words, with which it is adorned and disguised, and setting his own assertions together in the form of a syllogism. "The manager of every theatre must suit his entertainments to the company, and if he is supported by the grave and sober, he must

“suit himself to the licentious and profane.”——
“We know that in every nation there must be
“amusements and public entertainments, and the
“stage has always made one in every civilized
“and polished nation. We cannot hope to abolish it.”——Ergo, According to this author, it is the duty of good men to attend the stage. But I leave the reader to judge, Whether, from the first of his propositions, which is a certain truth, it is not more just to infer, that till the majority of those who attend the stage are good, its entertainment cannot be fit for the Christian ear; and because that will never be, no Christian ought to go there.

And what a shameful begging of the question is his second proposition, “That we cannot hope to abolish it.” It is hard to tell what we may hope for in this age, but we insist that it ought to be abolished. Nay, we do hope to abolish it just as much as other vices. We cannot hope to see the time when there shall be no gaming, cheating, or lying; but we must still preach against all such vices, and will never exhort good men to go to gaming-tables, to persuade them to play fair, and lessen the wickedness of the practice. In short, it is a full refutation of the extravagant assertion of good men being obliged, as matter

of duty, to go to the theatre, that no such command is in the word of God, and that it is not, and cannot be necessary to any,* since it is evidently pernicious to great use it can be lawful to none.

It would give Christians a much more just as more extensive view of their duty, they commonly have; if they would consider, not only the influence of their actions, but the influence of their words. All their visible actions have an effect upon others as well as themselves. Every word we see, or hear makes some impression, though for the most part unperceived, and contribute every moment, to form each character. What a melancholy view this gives us of the state of religion among us at present, that when piety towards God is excluded from many moral systems, and that of virtue confined to the duties of social life, the better half of these also should be cut off, all regard to the souls of others forgotten, and rided? Nothing indeed is left but a few actions of compliment, a few insignificant

* It is proper here to remark, how natural it is to suppose, that the argument would be carried this far, when the stage came to be pleaded for as useful to the interest of virtue. And therefore I have taken notice, that these prophets run unscathed, of which remark will now clearly appear.

of present conveniency; for that which some modern refiners have dignified with the name of virtue, is nothing else but polished luxury, a flattering of each other in their vices, a provocation of each other to sensual indulgence, and that "friendship of the world," which "is enmity with God."

I would now ask the reader, after perusing the preceding arguments against the stage, Whether he is convinced that it is inconsistent with the character of a Christian, or not? If he shall answer in the negative, if he has still some remaining argument in its defence, or some method, which has not occurred to me, to take off the force of the reasoning, I would next ask, Whether it does not at least render it a doubtful point? Whether, joined with the concurrent testimony of the best and wisest men in all ages against it, as it appeared among them, and the impurity and corruption that still attends it, there is not at least some ground of hesitation? And, if so much be but allowed, it becomes on this very account unlawful to every Christian, who takes the word of God for the rule of his conduct. There clear evidence and full persuasion is required before an action can be lawful, and where doubt arises, we are commanded to abstain.

1

happy state that condemneth not him
 If that thing which he alloweth: and b
 "doubteth is destined, if he eat; because
 "eth not of faith, for whatsoever is not a
 "in sin." Rom. xiv. 22, 23.

Hitherto we have reasoned against what
 led a "well regulated stage." That is to s
 stand of attacking the corruptions which
 adhere to it, we have endeavored to shew
 from the purpose intended by it, from th
 just state, and general taste of mankind
 the nature of that thing itself, a public the
 not capable of such a regulation, as to a
 consistent with the purity of the Christian
 doctrine to attend or support it. If any con
 that part of the above reasoning is too al
 tered, and not quite level to the apprehens
 every reader, let it be remembered, that it
 rested against an idea so abstracted, that it
 not did, and from what we have seen, th
 reason to believe it never can exist. It is
 altogether imaginary, and is dressed up by
 author who defends it, in the manner and
 that best pleases himself; so that it is ind
 less difficult to refute or shew the unlaw
 of a well-regulated stage, than to know
 it.

If the authors on this subject would enter into particulars, and give us a list of the useful and instructive plays with which our stage is to be served ; lay down a plan of strict discipline, for introducing and preserving purity among the actors ; and shew us by whom the managers are to be chosen, and their fidelity tried, with some general rules for their conduct, it might soon be determined by plain and simple arguments, Whether such an entertainment could be safely permitted to a Christian, or not. But, when they give us no farther account of it, than by calling it a stage properly regulated, they involve themselves at once in obscurity, as to the very subject of their discourse. It is no wonder then, that they can make a parade with a few glittering phrases, as picture of nature, moral lecture, amiable character, compassion for virtue in distress, decency of the drama, and several others. We are put to a stand what to say to such things, for if we speak of the impure sentiments of authors, or the wanton gesticulations of actors, all these are immediately given up, and yet the ~~fort~~ remains as entire as ever. Therefore, the method taken in this treatise, with all the disadvantages that attend it, was looked upon to be the best and the clearest that could be chosen ; to show,

that those from whom a reformation of it must come, are neither able nor willing to do it; that the very materials of which the system is to consist are wanting, and therefore that the project be always found upon the ground of impossibility. It may indeed be matter of wonder among the many schemes and projects offered to the consideration of the public, that there has never been any attempt to point out the way, how the stage may be brought and kept in such a state of regulation as is consistent with the Christian character. There have been attempts to show how money is to be created, and the national debt or the annual supplies raised, without touching the subject. Some, who have not their own, have endeavored to persuade the world, that it is the easiest thing in the world to grow rich in a few years, with little or no improvement of man, nor, or beast, nor, so far as I have heard or seen, has any bold man to lay down a distinct plan for the improvement of the stage. When this is the case, and the considerations already mentioned, confirm every impartial person in the belief, that such improvement is not to be expected. I hope therefore, there may now be some prospect of success, in warning every one who

to be esteemed a disciple of Christ against the stage, as it hitherto has been, and now is. Experience is of all others the surest test of the tendency of any practice. It is still more to be depended on than the most plausible and apparently conclusive reasoning, upon what hath never yet been tried. Let us then consider, what hath been the spirit and tendency of almost the whole plays which have been represented, from time to time, upon the stage. Have not love and intrigue been their perpetual theme, and that not in a common and orderly way, but with resistance and impediments, such as rivalry and jealousy, the opposition of parents, and other things of a similar nature, that the passions may be strongly excited, and that the force of love, and its triumph over every obstacle, may be set before the audience as a lesson? Is not the polite well-bred man the hero of such plays, a character formed upon the maxims of the world, and chiefly such of them as are most contrary to the gospel? Are not unchristian resentment and false honor the characteristics of every such person?

What is the character of a clergyman when it is taken from the stage? If the person introduced is supposed to possess any degree of abil-

ity, hypocrisy is the leading part of the character. But for the most part, awkwardness, ignorance, dulness and pedantry are represented as inseparable from men of that function. This is not done to correct these faults when appearing in some of that profession, by comparing them with others free from such reproachful defects; but it is the character of the clergyman in general, who is commonly introduced single, and compared with the men acquainted with the world, very little to his advantage. The truth is, it seems to be a maxim with dramatic authors, to strip men of every profession of their several excellencies; that the rake may be adorned with the spoils: even learning is commonly ascribed to him; how consistently with truth or nature, and consequently with taste itself, I leave the reader to determine.

And where can the plays be found, at least comedies, that are free from impurity, either directly or by allusion and double-meaning? It is amazing to think, that women who pretend to decency and reputation, whose brightest ornament ought to be modesty, should continue to abet, by their presence, so much unchastity, as is to be found in the theatre. How few plays are acted which a modest woman can see, consistently

with decency in every part? And even when the plays are more reserved: nevertheless, they are sure to be seasoned with something of this kind in the prologue or epilogue, the music between the acts, or in some scandalous farce with which the diversion is concluded. The power of custom and fashion is very great, in making people blind to the most manifest qualities and tendencies of things. There are ladies who frequently attend the stage, who if they were but once entertained with the same images in a private family, with which they are often presented there, would rise with indignation, and reckon their reputation ruined if ever they should return. I pretend to no knowledge of these things, but from printed accounts, and the public bills of what plays are to be acted, sometimes by the particular desire of ladies of quality, and yet may safely affirm, that no woman of reputation (as it is called in the world) much less of piety, who has been ten times in a play-house, durst repeat in company all that she has heard there. With what consistency they gravely return to the same schools of lewdness, they themselves best know.

It ought to be considered, particularly with regard to the younger of both sexes, that, in the theatre, their minds must incessantly acquire an

inclination to bombast and extravagance; a unfitted for the sober and serious affairs of men's life. Common or little things give a entertainment upon the stage, except when are ridiculed. There must always be some great, surprising and striking. In when all obstacles are removed, and the man is agreed on, the play is done. This gives mind such a turn, that it is apt to despise any business or man, or decide it as ridiculous. Ask a merchant whether he chooses that a profession should go to learn exactness and industry from the stage. Or, whether he expects most punctual payments from those whose reality is strengthened there, by weeping over the loss of distress. Suppose a matron coming from the theatre filled with the ideas that are impressed upon the imagination, how so contemptible do all the affairs of her family appear, and how much must she be disposed to the time already consumed) to for to guide them?

The actors themselves are a signal proof of this. How seldom does it happen, if ever any of them live sober and regular till their debts with honesty, or manage their with discretion? They are originally men

same composition with others, but their employment wholly incapacitates them for prudence and regularity, gives them a dissipation of mind and unstaidness of spirit, so that they cannot attend to the affairs of life. Nay, if I am rightly informed, that variety of characters which they put on in the theatre, deprives them of common sense, and leaves them in a manner no character at all of their own. It is confidently said, by those who have thought it worth while to make the trial, that nothing can be more insipid than the conversation of a player on any other subject than that of his profession. I cannot indeed answer for this remark, having it only by report, and never having exchanged a word with one of that employment in my life. However, if it holds, a degree of the same effect must necessarily be wrought upon those who attend the stage.

But folly or bad management is not all that is to be laid to the charge of players: they are almost universally vicious, and of such abandoned characters, as might justly make those who defend the stage, ashamed to speak of learning virtue under such masters. Can men learn piety from the profane, mortification from the sensual, or modesty from harlots? And will any deny that hired stage-players have always, and that deser-

"world, the lust of the flesh, and the love of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the father, but is of the world." 1 John. ii. It is certainly the greatest wisdom to seek knowledge of the world by partaking with men in their sins. Whatever knowledge is otherwise acquired, is shameful, and not edifying. How woe! that are those parents, instead of endeavouring to inspire their children with a holy and manly resolution, of daring to appear singular in an adherence to their religion, suffer them to be plunged in sin, that they may not be defective in politeness. Why should we care for the world, or say thing else, but to get to our spiritual improvement? Then

* This is not meant to condemn all human accomplishments, which have not an immediate reference to religious improvement, but to affirm, that they ought to be kept in a just subordination and subserviency, to the great and chief end of man. There are, no doubt, a number of arts, both useful and ornamental, which produce other immediate effects, than to make men holy, because they are, by the greatest part of the world, directed to the worst of purposes, they are considered as having no connexion with religion at all. But this is a mistake; for a good man will be directed in the choice application of all such arts, by the general and leading purpose of his life. And as he who eats for no other or higher end than pleasing his palate, is justly condemned as a mere groveling sensualist, so, whoever has no farther view in his education and accomplishment, than to shine and make a figure in the fashionable world, does not in respect act the part of a Christian. In short, there are among the number of indifferent things, which should be supremely and ultimately directed to the glory of

all that is truly valuable, must, by the very supposition, be innocently learned, and to bear with a noble disdain the scoffs of more experienced sinners is the greatest glory.

Like to the above is another argument in favor of the stage, that men must have amusements, and that the stage is much better than many others, which would probably be put in its place. It is said, that of all the time spent by the fashionable part of the world, at present, in diversions, that which they allot to the stage is most innocently, or least hurtfully employed. Is there any more in this, than a declaration of the shameful luxury and degeneracy of the present age, an alarming token of approaching judgment? Do not such persons know, that all serious Christians condemn every one of these criminal pleasures, and will never allow it as any advantage to exchange one of them for another. But it is less surprising to hear such palliative arguments used in conversation: an author above referred to has been bold enough, in print, to reason in the same way. He says, "That no abuse was ever admitted on any stage, but might pass for perfect decency, when compared to what may have been

When they are not capable of this, either immediately or remotely, much more when they are contrary to it, they must be condemned.

“ often heard of, at a gossiping, a merry making
 “ a meeting of young fellows.*” Again, after
 telling us that we cannot hope to abolish the stage
 he says, “ And if we could, we should only
 “ make way for the return of drunkenness, gam-
 “ ing and rude cabals, which the more decent
 “ conversation and manners of civilized time
 “ have in a great manner abolished.” I lay hold
 of this gentleman’s reasoning, who pleads for
 civilizing the world, and not sanctifying it, as a
 confession of the weakness of his cause, and a
 confirmation of all the arguments produced in
 this treatise against the stage. For, if he means
 to show, that stage-plays were agreeable to the
 purity of the gospel, that drunkenness is worse
 (if indeed it be so) could be no evidence of it
 at all. He must therefore, if he speaks to any
 purpose, plead for the toleration of sinful diver-
 sions, because they are comparatively less sinful
 than others ; and if that is the case, I detest his
 principles, and so will every Christian.

Having mentioned this author, perhaps it may
 be expected, that I would take some notice of
 the other arguments brought by him in defence
 of the stage. It is not easy either to enumerate
 or comprehend them, they are thrown together

* *Morality of Stage-Plays seriously considered*, p. 19.

in such confusion, and expressed in such vague and general terms. He says (page 3.) "The people of this island are not inferior to those of any other age or country whatever. This will be a presumption, that if plays are a poison, it is at least but slow in its operation." And, p. 17. "We may venture to ask, Whether knowledge, whether industry and commerce have declined in this city (Edinburgh) since the play-house was first opened here? It will be owned, that they have rather increased." I would venture to ask, What sort of an argument this is, and what follows from it, though both his assertions were allowed to be true, which yet may easily be in many respects controverted? If the stage, as he would insinuate, be the cause of our improvement, then is his argument self-contradictory, for we ought to be greatly inferior in purity to the people of other countries, who have enjoyed the reforming stage much longer, which is contrary to his supposition. The truth is, the stage is not the cause, but the consequence of wealth; and it is neither the cause nor consequence of goodness or knowledge, except so far as it certainly implies more knowledge than uncultivated savages possess, and is only to be found in what this author calls civilized na-

tion. How easy were it for me to name
 vices unknown to barbarians, which
 places of taste and polished manners.
 at the same time insinuate, that these vices
 contributed to improve us in knowledge
 taste, it would be just such an argument
 here used in favor of the stage, and the
 meaning of both is, the abuse of knowledge
 the cause of it.

It were worth while to consider a list
 improvements in knowledge in this age, we
 often the boast of not the most knowing.
 Perhaps it may be allowed, that there is
 the world a good deal of knowledge of all
 kinds, but it is plain we owe it to the labor
 predecessors, and not our own. And though
 it is to be feared, we may improve it no
 than many young men do, who come to the
 possession of wealth of their fathers'.
 They neither know the worth nor the use
 but squander it idly away, in the most un-
 able or hurtful pursuits. It is doubtless,
 thing at present, to acquire a superficial
 ledge, from magazines, reviews, dictionaries
 other helps to the slothful student. He
 able at a very small expense, to join the
 and the scholar, and triumphs in the taste

enlightened age, of which he hath the comfort to reflect, that he himself makes a part. But for our mortification, let us recollect, that as several writers have observed, human things never continue long at a stand. There is commonly a revolution of knowledge and learning, as of riches and power. For as states grow up from poverty to industry, wealth and power; so, from these they proceed to luxury and vice; and by them are brought back to poverty and subjection. In the same manner, with respect to learning, men rise from ignorance to application; from application to knowledge; this ripens into taste and judgment; then from a desire of distinguishing themselves, they superadd affected ornaments, become more fanciful than solid; their taste corrupts with their manners, and they fall back into the gulf of ignorance. The several steps of these gradations commonly correspond; and if we desire to know in what period of each, we of this nation are at present, it is probable, we are in the age of luxury, as to the first, and in the eve at least of a false and frothy taste as to learning; and may therefore fear, that as a late very elegant writer expresses it, We shall relapse fast into barbarism.

Another argument produced by this author, is,

that the apostle Paul, in preaching at Athens, in writing to the Corinthians, has introduced into the sacred text a line from a Greek which now subsists—“This (he says) is not to connect the defence of plays with the “of scripture itself.” The fact is not that though he has given but a poor specimen of knowledge of this age, by mistaking in the of these remarks, the expression quoted by the apostle; for this sentence, “in him we live, move, and have our being,” which, he is a very sublime expression, and beautifully applied by the apostle, was not cited from the poet following, “For we are also his offspring.” But supposing he had (as he easily might) hit upon the true citation, what follows from Did ever any body affirm, that no poet writes, or the player could speak any thing the true? And what is to hinder an inspired man from judging them out of their own mouths? What concern has this with the stage? It implies any defence of the stage in general, it implies a stronger defence of the particular and poem, from which the citations are taken. Now, I dare say, neither this author, nor any other will assert, that these are in all respects

able to the Christian character. These citations do no other way connect the defence of the stage with the honor of scripture, than a minister's citing, in writing or discourse, a passage from Horace or Juvenal, would connect the defence of all the obscenity that is to be found in the rest of their works, with the honor of preaching.

The only thing further in this essay not obviated in the preceding discourse, is what he says on the subject of the poor: "That the expense
" laid out on the stage does not hinder the charitable supply of the poor, and that they suffer
" no loss by it, for it comes at last into the hands
" of the poor, and is paid as the price of their
" labor.—Every player must be maintained,
" clothed and lodged." It does not suit with my present purpose to enter into controversial altercation, or to treat this author with that severity he deserves; and therefore I shall only say, that his reasoning upon this subject is the very same from which Doctor Mandeville draws this absurd and hated consequence, "Private vices are public benefits."

The truth is, a serious person can scarce have a stronger evidence of the immorality of the stage, than the perusal of these little pieces of satire, which have been published, in so great a

society, against the presbytery of Edinburgh; within these few weeks, because of their public avocation against it. They offer no other defence, but denying the preaching of the gospel, blasphemously, conjoining the pulpit with the stage, and crimination upon some who are supposed to live inconsistently with their character. It is not worth while to spend three words in determining whether drunkenness, deceit and hypocrisy are worse than the stage or not; but if that is the strongest argument that can be offered in its support, we to all those who attend it. The new reformed tragedy has indeed been very unlucky in its advocates. There is an old saying that a man is known by his company. If this be true also of a play, which one would think it should, as it must be chiefly to the taste of congenial minds, by those who have appeared in defence of Douglas, it is a work of very little merit.

It may be expected, that, having brought this performance on the field, I should add some further reflections, upon the aggravated sin of Ministers writing plays, or attending the stage. But though it is a very plain point, and indeed because it is so it would draw out this treatise to an immoderate length. If any man makes a ques-

tion of this, he must be wholly ignorant of the nature and importance of the ministerial character and office. These therefore it would be necessary to open distinctly, and to consider the solemn charge given to ministers in Scripture, to watch over the souls of their people, as those "who must give an account unto God;" to give themselves wholly to their duty, since some of those committed to them are from day to day, entering on an unchangeable state, whose blood, when they die unconverted, shall be required at the hand of the unfaithful pastor. None can entertain the least doubt upon this subject, who believe the testimony of Moses and the prophets; of Christ and his apostles, and, if they believe not their writings, neither will they believe my words.

Instead therefore of endeavoring to prove, I will make bold to affirm, that writing plays is an employment wholly foreign to the office, and attending theatrical representations an entertainment unbecoming the character of a minister of Christ: And must not both, or either of them, be a sacrilegious abstraction of that time and pains, which ought to have been laid out for the benefit of his people? Is it not also flying in the face of a clear and late act of parliament, agreeably to which the lords of council and session

not long ago found the stage contrary to law in this country? And though the law is eluded, and the penalty evaded, by advertising a concert, after which will be performed, gratis, a tragedy, &c. Yet surely, the world in judging of characters, or a church court in judging of the conduct of its members, will pay no regard to the poor and shameful evasion. Can we then think of this audacious attempt at the present juncture, without applying to ourselves the words of Isaiah, "And in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth, and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine; let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die. And it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of hosts, surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you till you die, saith the Lord of hosts," Isa. xxii. 12, 13, 14.

A

LETTER

RESPECTING

PLAY ACTORS.



A

LETTER

RESPECTING PLAY ACTORS.

SIR,

THERE appeared in the national Gazette of the -- of March last, a passage said to be taken from a French publication, which no doubt the editor of the Gazette thought worthy of the public eye. It was to the following purpose:—It must appear very surprising that even down to the expiration of the French Monarchy, there was a character of disgrace affixed to the profession of a player, especially when compared to the kindred professions of preacher or pleader. Although the talents necessary to these occupations are as much inferior to those of a good comedian, as the talents of a drug-pounding apothecary to those of a regular bred physician; and that it is hoped that the recovery of the character due to theatrical merit, will contribute not a little to the improvement of future manners.

I have long expected to see some remarks published on this singular sentiment, but, either no-

body has thought it worthy of their attention, or the strictures have not fallen in my way; therefore as this subject is not one of those that lose their importance or propriety by a short lapse of time; and as, on the contrary, the present controversy in Philadelphia, on the application to the legislature against the stage, seems to render it peculiarly seasonable, I beg the favor of you to publish the following observations:

The author of the paragraph published by Mr. Freneau, though a warm advocate for the theatre, vouches for me as to the fact that there has been a character of disgrace for many ages, impressed upon the theatrical profession. Though he had not affirmed it, the fact is undoubtedly certain, that the theatrical profession has had a disgrace affixed to it from the earliest times, and in all the countries where theatres have been in use.

Public actors on the stage were counted infamous by the Roman law, they were excommunicated by the church from the time of the introduction of Christianity into the Roman empire, even to the time mentioned by the author of the above paragraph, the expiration of the French monarchy.

If this had been only occasional, local and temporary, it might have been considered as owing

to some of those accidental, but transient causes, which sometimes produce remarkable effects for a little time, and then wholly cease. But so uniform and so general an effect must have some adequate and permanent cause or causes to produce it—which is to be the subject of the present inquiry.

I have only to add as to the fact, that even the present living, warmest and most zealous advocates for the stage have not been able to efface this impression from their own minds. There does not exist in Philadelphia, or any where else, any person of rank or character, who would be pleased with an alliance with the stage, either by their son's marriage with an actress, or by their daughters being married to actors.

Before entering into the principal part of the subject, it will be necessary that the reader should give particular attention to the following remark. The infamy which has attended the profession of players belongs wholly to the profession itself, and not to the persons, or rather circumstances by which they may be distinguished. Players when they are seen on the stage, are dressed in the finest habits, assume the manners, and speak the language of kings and queens, princess and princesses, heroes and heroines, which is a very

different situation from those who belong to what we sometimes call the lower classes of life. Those who follow the mechanic arts are sometimes considered as in a state of disgrace, but it is wholly owing, not to their profession, but to the poverty and want of education of a great majority of them. The profession is lawful, laudable, useful and necessary. Let me suppose a blacksmith, a weaver, a shoemaker, a carpenter, or any other of the mechanic professions, and suppose that, by activity and industry he becomes wealthy, and instead of a workshop, sets up a factory; if he becomes rich early enough in life, to give his children a good education and a handsome fortune, tell me who is the person, who would refuse his alliance or be ashamed of his connexion? Is it not quite otherwise as to players, with whom though eminent in their profession, as Moliere and Mademoiselle Clairon in France, Garrick, Mrs. Siddons and Mrs. Bellamy in England, I believe there is hardly any example of any person of decent station, or of middling fortune who would be ambitious of a family connexion. Therefore, I repeat it, and desire it may be kept in view in the whole of this reasoning, that the disgrace impressed upon the character of players belongs to the profession, and not to

the person. Nay, though according to the old saying *exceptio firmat regulam*, there should be an instance or two picked up in distant ages, in which superlative merit, overcame the general prepossession, such as *Roscus* in Rome, *Moliere* in France, and *Shakspeare* in England, this would not hinder the certainty or importance of the remark in general, of the opprobrium that follows the profession. I now proceed to the reasons on which the fact is founded. First, all powers and talents whatever, though excellent in themselves, when they are applied to the single purpose of answering the idle, vain, or vicious part of society, become contemptible.

There is not upon record among the sayings of bold men, one more remarkable than that of *Sobrius*, the tribune, to *Nero* the Roman emperor, when asked by the emperor, why he who was one of his personal guards, had conspired against him? He answered, I loved you as much as any man, as long as you deserved to be loved, but I began to hate you when after the murder of your wife and mother, you become a charioteer, a comedian and a buffoon. I am sensible that in this reasoning I consider theatrical pieces properly speaking as intended for amusement. I am not however ignorant that some have dignified

them with the character of schools or lessons of morality.

But as they have been generally called, and are still called by the writers in the Philadelphia News-papers, *amusements*, so I am confident every body must perceive that this was their original purpose, and will be their capital and their principal effect. It seems to me of consequence in this argument to observe, that what is true of theatrical exhibitions is true of every other effect of human genius or art, when applied to the purposes of amusement and folly, they become contemptible. Of all external accomplishments, there is none that has been for many ages held in greater esteem than good horsemanship. It has been said that the human form never appears with greater dignity than when a handsome man appears on horseback, with proper and elegant management of that noble creature. Yet when men employ themselves in singular and whimsical feats, standing instead of riding upon a horse at full gallop, or upon two horses at once, or other feats of the like nature, in order to amuse the vain, and gather money from the foolish, it immediately appears contemptible. And for my own part, I would no more hold communication with a master of the circus than a manager of

the theatre. And I should be sorry to be thought to have any intimacy with either the one or the other.

The general observation which I have made applies to all human arts, of every kind and class. Music has always been esteemed one of the finest arts, and was originally used in the worship of God, and the praise of heroes. Yet when music is applied to the purposes of amusement only, it becomes wholly contemptible. And I believe the public performers, from the men-singers and women-singers of Solomon, to the singers in the present theatres, are considered as in a disgraceful calling. I am happy to have even lord Chesterfield on politeness, for my assistant in this cause: for though he acknowledges music to be one of the fine arts, yet he thinks to be too great a connoisseur, and to be always fiddling and playing, is not consistent with the character of a gentleman.

In the second place, as players have been generally persons of loose morals, so their employment directly leads to the corruption of the heart. It is an allowed principle, among critics, that no human passion or character, can be well represented, unless it be felt: this they call entering into the spirit of the part. Now, I suppose the following philosophical remark is equal-

ly certain, that every human passion, especially when strongly felt, gives a certain modification to the blood and spirits, and makes the whole frame more susceptible of its return. Therefore, whoever has justly and strongly acted human passions, that are vicious, will be more prone to these same passions; and indeed, with respect to the whole character, they will soon be in reality, what they have so often seemed to be.

This applies to the whole extent of theatrical representation. Whoever has acted the part of a proud or revengeful person, I should not like to fall in his way, when offended; and if any man has often acted the part of a rogue or deceiver, I should not be willing to trust him with my money. It may either be added, as another remark, or considered as a farther illustration of the one last made, that players, by so frequently appearing in an assumed character, lose all character of their own. Nothing, says an eminent and learned writer, "is more awkward and insipid, than a player, out of the line of his own profession." And indeed what must that memory and brain be, where the constant business of its possessor is to obliterate one scene or system of folly, only to make way for another?

In the third place, I cannot help thinking, it is of some moment to observe, that players, in consequence of their profession, appearing continually in an assumed character, or being employed in preparing to assume it, must lose all sense of sincerity and truth. Truth is so sacred a thing, that even the least violation of it, is not without its degree of guilt and danger. It was far from being so absurd as it often has been said to be, what the old Spartan answered to an Athenian, who spoke to him of the fine lessons found in their tragedies : ‘ I think I could learn ‘ virtue much better from our own rules of truth ‘ and justice, than by hearing your lies.’

I will here observe, that some very able and judicious persons have given it as a serious and important advice to young persons, to guard against mimicking and taking off others, as it is called, in language, voice, and gesture ; because it tends to destroy the simplicity and dignity of personal manners and behaviour. I myself, in early life, knew a young man of good talents, who absolutely unfitted himself for public speaking, by this practice. He was educated for the ministry, and was in every respect well qualified for the office ; but having without suspicion frequently amused himself and others, by imitating

the tones and gestures of the most eminent preachers of the city where he lived, when he began to preach himself, he could not avoid falling into one or other of those tones and manners which he had so often mimicked. This, as soon as it was perceived, threw the audience into a burst of laughter, and he was soon obliged to quit the profession altogether, for no other reason, than he had thus spoiled himself by the talent of imitation.—I may say further, in support of this remark, that I have known no instance of one eminent for mimicking, who did not in time make himself contemptible.

But the human passion that makes the most conspicuous figure in the theatre, is love. A play without intrigue and gallantry, would be no play at all. This passion is, of all others, that which has produced the greatest degree of guilt and misery, in the history of mankind. Now is it, or can it be denied, that actors in the theatre are trained up in the knowledge and exercise of this passion, in all its forms. It seems to have been a sentiment of this kind, that led a certain author to say, that to send young people to the theatre to form their manners, is to expect, "that they will learn virtue from profligates, and modesty from harlots."

These remarks seem to me fully sufficient to account for the disgrace that has so generally followed the profession of an actor. I shall only add a few words upon an opinion to be found in Wessels and some other eminent authors. They condemn public theatres, and despise hired play-actors: but they recommend acting pieces by young persons, in schools or in private families, as a means of obtaining grace and propriety in pronunciation. On this I shall just observe, that though this practice is much less dangerous than public theatre, yet it does not seem to me to be of much necessity for obtaining the end proposed. And I dare say, that if this practice were often repeated, the fame that may be acquired at such exhibitions, would upon the whole, be very little to the honor or benefit of those who acquired it.

I will conclude this essay by an observation on the comparison, made by the French writer, mentioned in the beginning, between the talents necessary to a good preacher or pleader, and those necessary to a good play-actor. I wish he had mentioned the talents and qualifications, that we might have been able to examine his reasoning. As for my own part, I can recollect but two which are essentially requisite to a play-

er, memory and mimicry; and I have known both these talents possessed in great perfection, by men who were not in understanding many degrees above fools; and on the contrary, some of the first men whom history records, that were no way remarkable in point of memory, and totally destitute of the other quality.

A

SERMON,

DELIVERED JANUARY 19, 1812,

AT THE REQUEST OF

A NUMBER OF YOUNG GENTLEMEN

OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK,

WHO HAD ASSEMBLED TO EXPRESS THEIR CONDOLENCE

WITH THE

INHABITANTS OF RICHMOND,

ON THE LATE MOURNFUL DISPENSATION OF PROVIDENCE

IN THAT CITY.

by
Joel Miller, D.D., 1812.

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TO THE YOUNG GENTLEMEN

AT WHOSE REQUEST THE FOLLOWING SERMON WAS DELIVERED, AND IS NOW PUBLISHED.

MY YOUNG FRIENDS,

YOUR resolution to express your condolence with the mourning inhabitants of *Richmond*, did you honour. Sympathy with the afflicted is ornamental to every age, but especially to the young. When, therefore, you requested me to address you on the occasion from the pulpit, although a compliance with your request was not a little inconvenient, I did not dare to refuse. But when, after being apprized, that if any thing were said by me in relation to the awful Calamity in question, it must include a solemn protest against Theatrical entertainments, you still unanimously persisted in urging your application, my duty to comply with it appeared no longer doubtful. It gives me pleasure to find that you so far approve of what I thought myself bound to say on that subject, as to wish it made still more public: for I will enjoy the satisfaction of believing, that approbation of the truth, had much more agency in prompting your second request, than civility to the preacher.

My first and chief wish concerning the following discourse, is, that it may prove useful. Allow me to hope, that you will review it with serious attention, and with solemn prayer; and that you may have reason to say, that one of the most distressing dispensations of Providence that our country ever witnessed, has been productive of good to YOU.

It is said of the great Sir *Mathew Hale*, that, when he was a youth at college, the players visiting *Oxford* he was so much corrupted by frequenting the theatre that, for some months, he almost wholly forsook studies. By this habit he not only lost much time but also found his mind filled with so many "vicious images," and "false sentiments," that he began to be alarmed for himself, and determined to abandon a course which he saw was leading him to ruin. When going to *London*, he resolved never to see a play again and rigidly adhered to his resolution. No one who knows the character of this most illustrious of English judges, will imagine, that he formed such a resolution rashly or weakly, or that he adhered to it without reason.

Were I to see all of you, my young Friends, I that distinguished Ornament of the land of our fathers, effecting a complete conquest over this propensity, I should consider it as a most hopeful pledge, that you would go further, and imitate him in his unfeigned piety, and in the general dignity, purity, and usefulness of his life.

That you may have grace given you to effect conquest, and to imitate this noble example; that God of all grace may be the Guide of your youth and the Consolation of your riper age; and that finally, with all the disciples of a crucified REDEEMER, you may share in an *inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away*, is the sincere prayer of,
Your friend,

SAMUEL MILLER

New-York Jan. 23, 1812.

A SERMON, &c.

LAMENTATIONS ii. 1, 13.

How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven into the earth, the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger! What thing shall I take to witness for thee? What thing shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Zion? For thy breach is great like the sea; who can heal thee?

THE prophet *Jeremiah* lived in a dark and distressing day. Religion, among his countrymen, had sunk to an ebb awfully low. The body of the people had become extremely licentious in principle, and corrupt in practice. And a holy God had visited them with many tokens of his righteous displeasure. By fire, by famine, by pestilence, and by the sword, he had taught them *terrible things in righteousness*; until, at length, wearied with their iniquities, he delivered them into the hands of their enemies, by whom they were, as a people, nearly destroyed.

Over this melancholy scene of guilt and suffering the Prophet composed his Lamentations. And never were scenes of misery, and feelings of anguish, painted with a more masterly hand. Never were the pa-

A Sermon. &c.

the ~~and~~ ~~prophets~~ is well as the force of grief, more
powerful than grief. As one of the ancient Fathers
warmly expresses it "every letter appears to be
written with a tear and every word to be the sound
of a broken heart and the writer a man of sorrows,
who scarcely ever breathed but in sighs, or spoke
but in groans."

Having been requested, on this occasion, to address
an audience with reference to a late awful calamity,
well known to you all, which has destroyed many val-
uable lives and has covered a sister City with mourning;
I have chosen the words just read as the foundation of
what shall be offered. May the great Master of as-
semblies direct us to such an application of them as
shall be profitable to every hearer!

*How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion
with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven
into earth, the beauty of Israel! What shall I take to
atone for thee? What thing shall I liken unto thee,
O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I equal to thee,
that I may comfort thee, O daughter of Zion? For
thy breach is great, like the sea; who can heal thee!*

Without staying, at present, to explain in detail the
several parts of this passage, I shall only observe, that
by the *daughter of Zion*, and the *daughter of Jeru-
salem*, we are to understand, by a figure common with
this Prophet, the inhabitants of the Jewish capital, in
which *Zion* stood; or rather the Jewish nation, the
covenanted people, the visible Church of God, under
the Old Testament economy. Of course, what the

* Gregory Nazianzen.

Prophet applies to that afflicted city; may, without impropriety, be applied either to the whole, or any part of a community, who call themselves a Christian people; or who are embraced even by the most lax profession, within the pale of the visible Church.

We may therefore consider the text **FIRST**, as a devout acknowledgment of the hand of God, in the afflictions which the Prophet laments;—**SECONDLY**, as an expression of sympathy with the afflicted;—and, **THIRDLY**, as pointing to the moral application of the calamities which he deplored.

I. There is, in the passage before us, a **DEVOUT ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE HAND OF GOD, IN THE AFFLICTION WHICH THE PROPHET LAMENTS.** *How hath the LORD covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger! How hath the LORD cast down the beauty of Israel!*

The doctrine, that the providence of God extends to all events, both in the natural and moral world; that nothing comes to pass without either his direct agency, or, at least, his wise permission and control; is a doctrine not only laid down in the plainest and most pointed manner in scripture; but also one which results from the perfections and the government of God when admitted in almost any sense. If there be a *general* providence, there must be a *particular* one. If God govern the world at all, he must order and direct every thing, without exception. Yes, brethren, if it were possible for a *sparrow to fall to the ground without our heavenly Father*; or if it were possible for the *hairs of any head to fail of being numbered by*

the infinite One; in short, if it were possible that there should be any thing not under the immediate and the constant control of the Governor of the world; then it would follow that some things may take place contrary to his will; then prayer would be a useless, nay, an unmeaning service; then Jehovah would be liable, every moment, to be arrested or disappointed in the progress of his plans, by the caprice of accident. But, if none of these things can be supposed without blasphemy, then the providence of God is *particular* as well as *universal*. It extends to all creatures, and all their actions.—*Is there evil in the city and the Lord hath not done it?* No; the devouring fire; the overwhelming tempest; the resistless lightning; the raging pestilence; the wasting famine; and the bloody sword, even when wielded by the vilest of men, are all instruments in the hand of God for accomplishing his will and pleasure. And as the providence of God is actually concerned in every thing which befalls individuals or communities; so he requires us to *notice* and to *acknowledge* that providence in all his dispensations towards us. *Not to regard the work of the Lord, or not to consider the operation of his hands*, he pronounces to be sin; and denying his agency in the works of providence, he expressly condemns, as *giving his glory to another*.

While, therefore, we deplore the heart-rending calamity which has fallen upon a neighbouring City, let us not forget, or place out of sight, the hand of God in the awful scene. It was not the work of chance. A righteous God has done it. His breath kindled the

devouring flame. Not a spark of the raging element rose or fell without his providential guidance: not a victim sank under its destroying power, without the discriminating and immediate hand of sovereign Wisdom. He ordered and controlled all the circumstances attending the melancholy scene. *He doth not, indeed afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.** But still *affliction cometh not forth of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground.†* What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil also? *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord! ‡*

II. The language of the mourning Prophet, while it notices and acknowledges the hand of God in the calamities which it deplures, at the same time **EXPRESSES THE TENDEREST SYMPATHY FOR THE SUFFERERS.** This is indicated in every line of our text and context:—and it is the feeling which ought to be cherished upon every similar occasion.

To sympathize with suffering humanity, however that suffering may have been produced, is a dictate of nature, as well as demanded by the authority of our common Creator. Thou shalt *weep with them that weep*, is a divine precept. When *one member of the body suffers, all the members suffer with it.* Thus it is in the *social* as well as in the *physical* body. Thus it is in domestic society. And thus it ought to be in the larger family of a city, a state, or a nation. When one part of a nation is afflicted, all the rest ought to feel for it. When, therefore, any of our friends or neighbours,

* Lam. iii. 33. † Job v. 6. ‡ Job i. 21, and ii. 10.

objects of the most remote portions of the globe, are not finally are visited with any signal calamity, we are bound to consider it not only as a solemn lesson, addressed to the whole body, but also as calling upon our soul for sympathy with them, — as they, under like circumstances, ought to sympathize with, and help for us. When this is not the case, one great design of the heavenly judgments, which is to instruct and to improve a whole people, by the calamities of a part, is, undoubtedly, speaking after the manner of men, supposed and defeated.

The melancholy dispensation of providence which we thus may deplore, is the pre-calculated calculation to interest the feelings, and to excite the truest sympathy of every mind. How shall we speak of some of such complicated horror? The heart shudders at the dreadful recital! When our beloved relatives die on the bed of disease, the event is solemn, and the bereavement trying; but it is the course of nature; and the frequency of the occurrence diminishes it of more than half its terrors. When our friends and neighbours fall in battle, the stroke is painful; but the soldier is expected, by himself and by others, to be in danger of such an end. When those who sail on the mighty deep, are dashed on the rocks, or swallowed up in the merciless waves, we mourn over the catastrophe; but when we bade them farewell, we remembered that they might never return.

But how shall we describe a calamity which has plunged a whole city into agony and tears? A calamity

unity which, to the number and the importance of its victims, added all the circumstances of horror which can well be conceived, to overwhelm the mind ! How sudden the burst of destruction ! How unexpected its approach, at such a place, and at such a time ! What complicated agony, both to the sufferers and to the survivors, attended its fatal progress !—But I dare not attempt further to depict a scene from which the mind revolts with shuddering !

Is there a Husband or a Wife who does not feel for those who saw beloved companions writhing in the merciless flames, and sinking in the most dreadful of all deaths, without being able to afford them relief ? Is there a Parent who does not feel for those agonizing fathers and mothers, who saw their endeared and promising children torn from them in an hour of unsuspecting confidence and mirth ? Is there a Brother or a Sister who does not sympathize with those almost frantic survivors, who were compelled to abandon to their cruel fate relatives dear to them as life ? Is there a Patriot who does not feel for the fatal stroke which snatched an amiable and respectable Chief Magistrate from the bosom of a beloved family, and from the confidence of his fellow citizens ? Is there a mind capable of admiring the attractive, the interesting, and the elegant, who is not ready to drop a tear over youth, beauty, genius, learning, and active worth, all sinking together in one smoking ruin ? Is there a heart alive to the delights of society, and the endearments of friendship, who does not mourn over the **MELANCHOLY**

CHASM which has been made in the social circles of that hapless city?—O RICHMOND! bereaved and mourning RICHMOND! *what shall we say unto thee? How shall we comfort thee? Thy breach is great like the sea; who can heal thee?* None but that God who has inflicted the stroke! *O that our heads were waters, and our eyes fountains of tears, that we might weep over the slain of the daughter of the people!*

III. We may consider the passage before us as POINTING TO THE MORAL APPLICATION OF THE CALAMITIES WHICH IT DEPLORES.

We are not only bound, my brethren, to notice and acknowledge the hand of God, in the dispensations of his providence, but also to study the moral aspect of those dispensations, and to apply, from time to time, the great moral lessons which they inculcate. If one great design of God, in all his work of providence, especially in *the judgments which he executeth*, is to make us *feel*, and to constrain us to pause in our career of folly, and *consider our ways*;—then, undoubtedly, we are criminal unless we study to derive, from every remarkable event the instructive lessons which it is suited to convey. Under this impression I am persuaded, that the Calamity which we lament, ought to be employed among other purposes as an occasion of entering a solemn protest against a prevailing, but most unchristian and most baneful Amusement.

The finger of God, in that calamity, points to the Amusement, with a distinctness which cannot be

mistaken, and with a solemnity which ought to excite our deepest attention!

I am very far, my brethren, from asserting, that the calamity to which we refer is to be considered as a special judgment on the immediate sufferers, on account of the unhallowed place and employment in which it found them. And still further am I from daring to pronounce on the character or the eternal state of those who were hurried before the bar of God from that place, and that employment. Alas! when mortals undertake to wield the thunders of Omnipotence, they display more of their own presumption and folly, than of an enlightened zeal for God and holiness. Still, however, when a dispensation of Providence of the most signal kind, stands in mournful connexion, as to time and place, with a prevailing sin; and when public feeling, as well as that Providence, opens the way for solemn remonstrance and warning, it were criminal to be silent. As a Minister of Jesus Christ, therefore, and as one bound by his own solemn vows, as well as by the authority of his Master, to be faithful, I dare not permit the present occasion to pass without imparting to you, most unreservedly, my impressions of the THEATRE as a public amusement.*

* For a fuller view of the arguments against the theatre, the reader is referred to the masterly *Essay on the Stage*, by the Rev. Dr. Witherspoon; to a work on the same subject by the Rev. John Styles, of Great Britain; to *A short View of the English Stage*, by the Rev. Jeremy Collier, afterwards a non-juring Bishop; and to Mrs. Hannah More's remarks on this subject in the *Preface* to her *Tragedies*. I have also seen Den-

I am constrained, then, to express my deep conviction, that theatrical entertainments are criminal in their nature, and mischievous in their effects; they are directly hostile to the precepts, and the whole spirit of the Religion of Jesus Christ; they are deeply baneful in their influence on society; utterly improper to be attended or countenanced by those who profess to be the disciples of Christ, or the friends of morality.

That this estimate is, by no means, an erroneous or extravagant one, will, I trust, be made to appear by the following considerations.

1. To attend on theatrical exhibitions, as an amusement, is A CRIMINAL WASTE OF TIME. I take it for granted that this argument will be thought either destitute of force, by those children of vanity who never consider the purpose for which they were created, or lay to heart the shortness and infinite value of time. But to the man of sense and wisdom, who remembers that life is short; that much is to be done; that he has never yet done, for God or for his generation, a tenth part of what he might and ought to have performed; and that in the manner in which we spend every hour, we must speedily give an account before the judgment seat of Christ; to every one who remembers these things, the argument will carry with it irresistible force. To spend an hour *unprofitably*, or even in a *less profitable*

man's answer to Collier; and am of the opinion that it may, with great confidence, be placed among those works which should be banished from the stage.

his way, when a mode of spending it more conformably to the will of God, and more usefully to himself and others, is within his reach, will appear to such an one quite as criminal as many of what are called gross sins, and quite as sacredly to be avoided.

The design of recreation,—I mean the design of it in the view of the Christian, or even of the sober-minded votary of mere natural religion, is not to kill time; but to refresh the body and mind, and to prepare them for the more vigorous and comfortable performance of duty. It follows, therefore, that recreations are lawful only so far as they are *necessary* and *suitable for this purpose*; of course, when they are either carried to such a *length* as to consume more time than we *need* to employ in this manner; or when they are of such a *nature* as to have no tendency to prepare either the body or the mind for the more easy, comfortable, and perfect discharge of the sober duties of life, but the contrary, they become wholly unjustifiable. They are a criminal waste of time; and to indulge in them is utterly unsuitable to the character of rational and accountable beings.

— Let us apply these principles to an attendance on the theatre as an amusement. Can *any* of the patrons of this amusement lay their hands on their hearts, and say, in the presence of God, that they attend upon it *merely*, or even *chiefly*, for the purpose of *preparing* their mind^s and bodies for a more suitable discharge of their *duties* as moral and accountable beings? Can they say that it is *better calculated*, than any other within their reach, to prepare them for the conscientious discharge

of most earnest? And can they appeal to the
 of hearts, and declare, that four, five, or six hours
 an evening, devoted to preparation for this annual
 and attendance upon it, is no more time than is
 easy to refresh and invigorate them for the solemn
 all-important work for which they were sent in
 world? The most determined advocates of the
 that lives, will not dare to answer these questions
 the affirmative. He would blush at the thought
 applying such principles to his practice. Either
 the scriptural precept to redeem time, and the scrip-
 rules for disposing of time, must be utterly reject-
 or theatrical amusements must be pronounced
 evil. Either men are not accountable for the manner
 in which they spend their time; or it is a sin to
 der precious hours in amusements, of which the
 evil consequence that can be passed upon them is, that
 are *unprofitable and vain*.

2. But we may go further; theatrical amuse-
 ments are not merely *unprofitable*; not merely a
 of time, which, if nothing more could be said,
 be sufficient to condemn them; but they have
 direct and unavoidable tendency to **DISPERSE THE**
MIND, AND TO LESSEN, IF NOT DESTROY,
**TASTE FOR SERIOUS AND SPIRITUAL EN-
 TERTAINMENTS.** Let me appeal to every one who has
 in the habit of attending on them, whether they
 not directly hostile to the spirit of *prayer*, and
 life of *communion with God*? Is there not some-
 thing in the most *decent* plays—is there
 something in the sentiments uttered in the the-

in the scenery displayed; in the dress, attitudes, and deportment of the performers; and in the licentious appearance, and libertine conduct of many of the audience, which is calculated, to say the least, to *expel seriousness* from the mind; to drive away all thoughts of *God*, of *eternity*, and of a *judgment* to come; and to extinguish all taste for *spiritual services*? Did ever an attendant on the theatre feel a cordial relish for the devotions of the closet, or of the family, immediately after his return from that place of amusement? I need not wait for an answer. There is no one who ever beheld the assemblage of “dazzling vanities” there displayed, who is not perfectly ready to pronounce, that few things have a more direct tendency to give the mind a vain and frivolous cast; to impair a taste for devotion; and to lessen, if not entirely banish, that spirituality which is at once the duty and the glory of the Christian.

Here I might rest the weight of the argument: for that which has a tendency to make the mind vain and frivolous *must* be criminal. That which has a tendency to draw off the heart from the sober, the solid, the useful, and the pious; and to inspire it with a ruling passion for the gay, the airy, the romantic, and the extravagant, cannot fail of being deeply pernicious. What a late eloquent writer says on another subject, is strictly applicable to this. The theatre “does not instruct a man to act, to enjoy, and to suffer, as a being that may to-morrow have finally abandoned this orb. Every thing is done to beguile the feeling of his being a *stranger*”

"and a pilgrim on the earth." The great end of all its art is "to raise the groves of an earthly paradise, to shade from sight that vista which opens into eternity."* But this is not all : for,

3. The theatre is now, and ever has been, A SCHOOL OF FALSE SENTIMENT, AND OF LICENTIOUS PRACTICE. While even the few plays which may be called *decent* have a tendency to impart to the mind a *vain* and *dissipating* influence ; a much larger number produce a more deep and extensive mischief. By far the greater part of the most popular dramas are profane, obscene, and calculated to pollute the imagination, to inflame the passions, and to recommend principles the most pernicious, and practices the most corrupt. How common is it to find in the language of the theatre, the most unqualified *profaneness*, and even *blasphemy* ! How often are *mock prayers*, and *irreverent appeals* to the Majesty of heaven, exhibited on the most trivial occasions ! How often is the dialogue interspersed with *terms* and *allusions* which pain the ear of modesty ; and these pronounced and exhibited in a way calculated to give additional force to the evil !†

* *Foster's Essays. Essay iv. On Polite Literature.*

† "It is amazing," says Dr. *Witherspoon*,—"It is amazing to think that women who pretend to decency and reputation, whose brightest ornament ought to be modesty, should continue to abet, by their presence, so much unchastity, as is to be found in Theatre ! How few plays are acted which a modest woman can see, consistently with decency, in every part ! And even when the plays are more reserved themselves, they are sure to be seasoned with something of this kind in the prologue or epilogue, the music between the acts, or in some scandalous farce with which the diversion is con-

and are such exhibitions innocent? Are they such as a disciple of Christ can witness with safety, or countenance with a good conscience? If they are, then it is difficult to say what is criminal, or what may not be justified.

But in a large number even of those plays which are not chargeable with open profaneness, or indelicacy of *language*,* the *moral* is such as no friend of religion, or of human happiness, can approve. Piety and virtue are made to appear contemptible; and vice, in the person of some favourite hero, is exhibited as attractive, honourable, and triumphant. Folly and crime have palliative, and even commendatory names bestowed upon them; and the extravagance of sinful passion is represented as amiable sensibility. The good man of the stage is a character as opposite to the good man of the Bible, as light

"cluded. The power of custom and fashion is very great in
"making people blind to the most manifest qualities and ten-
"dencies of things. There are ladies who frequently attend
"the stage, who, if they were but *once* entertained with the
"same images in a private family, with which they are *often*
"presented there, would rise with indignation, and reckon their
"reputation ruined, if they ever should return. No Woman
"of reputation, much less of piety, who has been ten times in
"a play house, durst repeat in company all that she has heard
"there. With what consistency they gravely return to the
"same school of lewdness, they themselves best know." *Es-*
"say on the Stage. *Works*, vol. iii. p. 84.

* It is a notorious fact, however, that in the *actual exhibition* of many plays, the language of which, as published from the press, is tolerably pure, the *performers*, especially the more popular of them, are in the habit of *adding*, on their own responsibility, expressions and allusions of the most exceptionable kind. This is continually done; and seldom fails to receive testimonies of *approbation* from the audience! so that no one can be sure that even a *decent* play will be exhibited as the author left it, and as he is accustomed to read it.

*to darkness, or as Christ to Belial.** The almost universal maxims of the theatre are, "that *love* is "the grand business of life: that *present gratification* is to be preferred to suffering virtue; that *ambition* is superior to contentment; that *pride* is "necessary to carry a man with decency through "the world; that *revenge* is manliness of spirit; "that *patience* is meanness; that *humility* is degradation; that *forgiveness* of injuries is beneath a "gentleman; that *human opinion* is the strongest "motive of action; that *human praise* is the highest "reward; that *human censure* is to be deprecated "more carefully than the wrath of God; that *duelling* is unavoidable; that *self-murder* may be justified; that *conjugal infidelity* is a venial, if not

* Lord *Kames*, (who was sufficiently liberal) speaking of *English Comedy*, as it "*continued, with very little softening,*" in his day, says—"It is there an established rule to deck out "the chief characters with every vice in fashion, however "gross. But as such characters, viewed in a true light, would "be disgusting, care is taken to *disguise* their deformity under the embellishments of wit, sprightliness, and good-humour, "which, in mixed company, make a capital figure. It requires "not time nor much thought to discover the poisonous influence of such plays. A young man of figure, emancipated at "last from the severity and restraint of a college education, "repairs to the capital, disposed to every sort of excess. The "play-house becomes his favourite amusement; and he is enchanted with the gaiety and splendour of the chief personages. "The disgust which vice gives him at first, soon wears off, to "make way for new notions, more liberal in his opinion; by "which a sovereign contempt of religion, and a declared war "upon the purity of the female sex, are converted from being "infamous vices, to be fashionable virtues. The infection "spreads gradually through all ranks, and becomes universal. "How gladly would I listen to any one who would undertake "to prove that what I have been describing is chimerical! "But the dissoluteness of our young people of birth will not "suffer me to doubt of its reality." *Elements of Criticism*, chap. ii. sect. 2.

“ an amiable frailty; and that, provided a man be
“ frank, generous, and brave; he may be a libertine,
“ an invader of conjugal purity, a despiser of God,
“ and a trampler on his laws, and yet celebrated as
“ the possessor of an excellent heart.” Yes, my
brethren, very often, nay, almost continually, are
plays not only exhibited in this Christian city, but
received by thousands, with bursts of applause,
which convey, and directly or indirectly recommend,
sentiments no less exceptionable and pestiferous than
these !

But, let me ask, are sentiments and representations
such as these, reconcileable with the Gospel of Jesus
Christ? Are they friendly either to individual happi-
ness, or social order? Are they proper for *Christians*
to witness or to encourage? Are ribaldry, blasphemy,
and indirect commendations of sin, proper even for
decent ears? Is this a school to which we ought to be
willing to introduce our *sons* and *daughters*, even if
we had no higher aim than to prepare them for vir-
tuous, dignified, and useful action in the present life?
Alas ! it is humiliating to be driven to the necessity of
asking these questions; but it is still more humiliating
to see thousands who profess to be Christians, *acting*
as if they might be deliberately answered in the affir-
mative !

4. Once more; those who attend the theatre SUP-
PORT AND ENCOURAGE A SET OF PERFORMERS
IN A LIFE OF VANITY, LICENTIOUSNESS AND SIN.
What is the life of *Players*? Even in its best form,
and when not degraded by uttering or exhibiting any

thing directly immoral, it is submission to a course of mean and unworthy *personation* for the entertainment of the multitude. But it is, in fact, much worse than this. A large portion of their time is employed in personating, displaying, and recommending vice. It were easy, moreover, to show, that the constant habit of *acting a part*; the practice of personating characters the most profligate and vile, much more frequently than those of an opposite cast; together with the nature of the intercourse which takes place, and must take place, between performers on the same stage,—all have a tendency to corrupt morals. Were the purity both of their principles and practice to be maintained under circumstances such as these, it would be almost a miracle. Accordingly, in perfect correspondence with their employment, is their prevailing character. In all countries under heaven they are found, what, upon principles of philosophy, as well as religion, we might expect to find them, triflers, buffoons, sensualists, unfit for sober employment, regardless of religion, and loose in their morals.* It is not

* This representation is more than confirmed by the celebrated *Rousseau*, who, with all his laxness of sentiment and practice, speaks of theatrical performers in the following strain:—
 “I observe, in general, that the *situation* of an actor, is a state of
 “*licentiousness* and *bad morals*; that the men are abandoned
 “to *disorder*; that the women lead a *scandalous life*; that the
 “one and the other, at once, avaricious and profane, ever over-
 “whelmed with debt, and ever prodigal, are as unrestrained
 “in their disposition, as they are void of scruple in respect to
 “the means of providing for it. In all countries their profession
 “is dishonourable: those who exercise it are every where con-
 “temned. Even at *Paris*, where they are treated with more
 “consideration, and where their conduct is better than in any
 “other place, a *sober citizen* would fear to be upon terms of ac-

pretended that there have been no exceptions to this character. But the exceptions have been so few, and their circumstances so peculiar, as to confirm rather than invalidate the general argument. And is it even true, that there ever *have* been *complete* exceptions? Was there ever a player who exhibited a life of steady, exemplary piety? Was there ever a theatrical performer, even of the greatest *talents*, who enjoyed the respect and confidence of any community? Nay, has there not been, in all ages, and in all states of society, a sort of infamy attached to the profession? Yet this is the profession which all who frequent the theatre contribute their share to encourage and support. They are chargeable with giving their influence and their pecuniary aid, for the maintenance of a class of persons, whose *business* it is, indirectly, to recommend error and crime, to corrupt our children; and to counteract whatever the friends of religion and good morals are striving to accomplish for the benefit of society.

If this representation be just; if attending on the

"timacy with the same actors who may be seen every day at the
 "tables of the great. This contempt is strongest wherever the
 "manners are the most pure; and there are countries of inno-
 "cence and simplicity, where the trade of an actor is held al-
 "most in horror. These are incontestible facts. You will say
 "that they result only from prejudices. I agree to it; but these
 "prejudices being *universal*, we must seek for an universal
 "cause; and I do not see where we can find it excepting in the
 "profession itself. I might impute these prejudices to the de-
 "clamations of *priests*, if I did not find them established among
 "the *Romans*, before the birth of Christianity; and not only
 "vaguely scattered in the minds of the people, but authorized
 "by express laws, which declared actors infamous, and took
 "from them the title and the rights of Roman citizens." See
 "*Christian Observer*, vol. iv. p. 229.

theatre is a criminal waste of time; if it tends to dissipate the mind, and to render it indisposed to serious and spiritual employments; if theatrical exhibitions are, very often, to say the least, in part profane, and demoralizing in their tendency; if their patrons, by every attendance on them, encourage and support sin, as a trade; then I ask any man who claims to be barely *moral*,—can any man who is so far from piety out of the question,—can any man who is to be barely *moral*, conscientiously countenance a seminary of vice? Above all, can a disciple of Jesus Christ, who professes to be governed by the Holy Spirit, and to imitate the example of his Master; who is commanded to live *soberly, and righteously, and godly in this present world*;* who is required to *pass the time of his sojourning here in fear*;† who is warned *not to be conformed to this world, and to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to reprove them*; who is required to *deny himself, to crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts, and whether he eats or drinks, or whatever he does, to do all to the glory of God*—can a disciple of Jesus Christ, who is commanded to *shun the company of the profane, to avoid the very appearance of evil, and to pray, that he be not into temptation*,‡—can HE be found in a place without sin? Is the theatre an amusement, the immediate prospect of which any man can

* Titus ii. 12. † 1 Peter i. 17. ‡ Rom. xii. 2. Ephes
§ Gal. v. 24. 1 Cor. x. 31. || Thess. v. 22. Matt.

the throne of grace, and implore a blessing? Is the theatre an amusement which will be remembered with complacency by any man when he comes to die? Or is it a place from which any reflecting man would be willing to be called to the bar of God? These are questions which, I take for granted, some of my hearers will receive with a smile; but which I most affectionately entreat those who have *named the name of Christ* to ponder in their hearts.

I am aware that, to this view of the subject, many objections will be made. It will be confidently asked, "Are there not *SOME* correct and moral plays, from which noble sentiments may be learned? Why, then, condemn theatrical entertainments in the gross?" I answer, allowing, for argument sake, that there are *SOME* unexceptionable, nay even excellent plays; allowing that one in twenty (an allowance much beyond the truth) is

* It is related, I think, of the Rev. Mr. Hervey, that being once on a journey in a stage coach, the *theatre* became the topic of conversation. A lady in company, who was much attached to this amusement, expatiated largely on the pleasures attending it. She observed, that she found much pleasure in anticipating the performance; much in witnessing it; and much in recollecting and conversing upon it afterwards. Mr. Hervey listened with respectful attention, and, when she had done, said "Madam, there is one pleasure growing out of the theatre which you have omitted to mention." Delighted to think of her opinion being confirmed by a person of his respectable appearance, she asked him, with eagerness, to what he referred? "I refer, Madam," said he gravely, "to the pleasure which the remembrance of having attended on the theatre will give you on a dying bed." The seasonable remark proved better than a thousand arguments. It made a deep and permanent impression. The lady never again went to the theatre, and became eminently pious.

of this character ; is it wise, is it lawful, to minister more than a *pound* of *poison*, for the sake of conveying with it an *ounce* of *nourishment* ? But we are not to judge of the theatre by the character of a *single play*, or by the merits of a *single* play. We are to contemplate and to decide upon the *SYSTEM* ; and that, not as it might be *supposed* but as it *actually exists*. And if its *GENERAL CHARACTER* is, and in all ages and nations *has* been corrupt and mischievous, then the argument pleads in its favour, on account of the small portion of just sentiment and real decency which it exhibits, is as weak in logic as it is detestable in morals.*

“ But persons,” it will be said, “ as pious as a preacher, or any of those who condemn it, have gone to the theatre ; undoubtedly, then it cannot be a very immoral place of resort.” And so people more pious, perhaps, than the preacher, or all his hearers, have committed, what are acknowledged on all hands to be sins, and sometimes even mortal sins : but do they cease to be *sins*, because

* After all, the number of plays that can be pronounced unexceptionable, with respect both to sentiment and language, is so small, that they are scarcely worthy of being introduced into the account. This cannot be said of *Cato*, or *the Revolt of Douglas*, or the very best of *Shakespeare's* Tragedies, or of many others which have been highly eulogized ; as is seen clearly and strongly illustrated in the *Essays on the Drama* by *Witherspoon*, *Styles*, *Mrs. H. More*, *Collier*, &c. In regard to the great mass of modern dramas, not excepting any which have been pronounced excellent, and exhibited with the highest applause on the *New-York* stage, it is a burden on every principle to speak of them as pure in their character.

men have committed them? Alas! brethren, how long will men deceive themselves, by taking the example of fallible mortals, and the fashion of the world, instead of the Word of God as their guide? It is not denied, that *professing* Christians *very often*, and *real* Christians *sometimes*, may have been found in the theatre: but we insist upon it, that all such cases ought to be regarded precisely in the same light, as when professing, or real Christians, fall into the commission of any other sin; that is, with *total disapprobation* of their conduct, as unworthy of the name which they bear; and with *humiliation* and *mourning*, as injurious to the honour of religion. It is not what *this* or *that* professor does, that will be asked of us, or that will be the rule of proceeding, before *the judgment seat of Christ*. *To the law, and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.**

“But the play-house never injured me,” another advocate of this amusement may plead—“My principles are so firmly fixed, and my mind so well balanced, that I can attend upon it, at least now and then, without the smallest sensible injury. In *me*, therefore, it can be no sin; especially as I go but *seldom*, and then only to see a *good play*.” When persons discover so much confidence in their own strength, as to imagine, that they alone, of all the children of men, may safely trifle with temptation, and tamper with sin, they give the worst possible

* Isaiah viii. 20.

evidence of the fact being really so. As a general rule, we are never so much in danger of moral mischief, as when we presumptuously imagine that we are totally beyond its reach. But allowing it to be as they say; they ought to remember, that "if *they* can venture into the fire with safety, there are *others* who cannot." If *they* can attend theatrical exhibitions without injury, thousands of the *young* whose principles are unfixed, and whose characters are unformed, go at the peril of their perdition. If *they* have no reason to apprehend danger, they encourage, by their example, multitudes, who have every reason to apprehend the utmost danger. If *they* go but *seldom*, and then only to *good plays*, they give the sanction of their presence to *others* who will go *often*, and to plays of *all descriptions*. And is this to be justified in persons who live in *society*, and who are bound habitually to regard the *welfare of society*? The truth is, my brethren, whatever may be the harmlessness of the theatre to particular individuals, who frequent it, they encourage by their *example*, and help to support by their *money*, that which is a source of corruption to thousands. In fact, no person can contribute, in the smallest degree, to the support of the stage, either by his presence or his purse, without being, more or less, a partaker in all the sin, and an accessory to all the mischief which may be transacted there.

"But certainly," another class of objectors will say, "attending the theatre, though allowed to be,

“ in a degree, improper, is not *so* criminal as some
“ other practices, in which the mass of mankind,
“ and more particularly the inhabitants of great ci-
“ ties, will always indulge. Is it not adviseable,
“ therefore, to *countenance*, or at least to *tolerate*
“ this, as a *less* evil than many others? Especially
“ when it is recollected, that there is something in
“ theatrical entertainments more refined, more in-
“ tellectual, and more elevated, than in almost any
“ other that can be imagined.” This is precisely,
in principle, as if any one were to say, “ Swearing
“ and lying, sabbath-breaking and drunkenness, are
“ none of them so atrocious in their nature as
“ murder; and, therefore, when we see men in
“ danger of committing the last mentioned crime,
“ we ought to endeavour to divert them from it, by
“ persuading them to engage in the practice of the
“ former sins.” But I need not say, that such rea-
soning and such counsel would be abhorred by every
correct mind. It is not for us to attempt to balance
known sins against each other. Whether attending
the theatre be, in its own nature, and in the sight
of the heart-searching God, *more* or *less* criminal
than many of those transgressions of the divine law
which we are accustomed to call gross sins, is a
question which I dare not decide, because I do not
know. This, however, I know, that if it be a sin *at*
all, it ought to be *abhorred* and *avoided*. It is never
justifiable to *make a compromise with sin*. It is al-
ways criminal to *do evil that good may come*. -

With respect to the plea, that theatrical entertainments have a *refined* and *intellectual* character, which recommends them to the more intelligent part of society, it does not weaken, in the least degree, the preceding course of reasoning. The fact under certain qualifications, is not disputed. Oratory is doubtless, a great and, in itself, most respectable art. Even the *mimickry* of it has wonderful charms; and therefore, when dramas of the better sort are represented with that exquisite skill and force which have sometimes appeared on the stage, they certainly form an amusement which is less gross and frivolous than many others, and which more particularly addresses itself to the intellectual powers, and to a literary taste. All this may be freely granted; and yet, if the theatre is now, always *has been*, and from the nature and design of the amusement, *must ever be*,* a system of deep, wide-spreading, and incalcu-

* Some advocates of the theatre have contended, that though it is, *at present*, by no means unexceptionable in its character and tendency; yet, that if it were properly *encouraged* and *regulated*, it *might be made* a school of good morals. The *fact*, that such a regulated and pure theatre *never has existed*, in any nation on earth, affords very strong presumption against the correctness of this opinion. The more decent friends of the theatre, have had every inducement, if it had been possible to reform its character. That they have *not* done it, may, therefore, be fairly ascribed to the *impracticability* of the task. But independent of this consideration, it is easy to show, that an amusement which necessarily includes the maintenance of a hired company of actors by profession; and which must be so far adapted to the various tastes in society, as to attract and secure sufficient patronage, from the mass of mankind, cannot fail of being corrupt in its character, and pernicious in its tendency. Were a theatre *strictly* and *purely Christian*, to be established, it would be shut up in less than twelve months, and its managers become bankrupt, for want of support. The stage may be, and has been *partially* reformed. It is by no means as

lable corruption ; is it not the duty of every one who values the welfare of society, to *deny himself* a favourite gratification, rather than to encourage so great an evil ? Nay, the more *plausible* and *fascinating* the amusement, the greater its *danger*, when it draws such consequences in its train ; and, of course, the greater the sin of giving it encouragement. And let that person who acknowledges the theatre to be a corrupting and criminal amusement, and who, at the same time, suffers himself to be drawn thither by the fame of a celebrated actor, or by what he calls a *taste for the exhibition of talents* ; —let him know, and tremble at the thought, that he is practically declaring, that his *taste* is to be indulged at the expense of the most precious interests of society, and at the risk of the everlasting displeasure of his God !

But it will, probably, still be demanded, “Why single out the theatre from all other sins, and hold it up with this reiterated and marked reprobation ? Is it so much worse than other evils, as to be worthy of such *peculiar* and *unrelenting* censure ?” I answer, we recur to the subject the more frequently, and raise our warning voice against it, with the more emphasis, for two reasons. The *first* is, because we are verily persuaded, that the mischiefs of

grossly licentious at this day, in *Great-Britain*, as it was in the days of *Dryden*, *Farguhar*, and *Congreve*. But it is still, there as well as here, dreadfully corrupt ; and it is one of those evils which, from their very *nature*, do not admit of *radical* and *total* reform. If it *exists* at all, it *must* be, in a degree, impure. The only method of curing the evil, is to *banish it entirely*.

this amusement are by no means so limited and unimportant in their extent, as many, who acknowledge its sinfulness in general, are ready to imagine. We are persuaded that, estimating its immediate and its ultimate consequences; considering the close connection in which it stands with many other sins, the mass of evil to which it gives rise, is so great as to defy calculation. The *second* reason is, that, by some strange concurrence of circumstances, it has happened that this evil, criminal and pestiferous as it evidently is, has crept, under a sort of disguise, into the Church of Christ, and has come to be considered as a lawful amusement for Christians! With respect to most other sins, which we are in the habit of reproofing, they are freely and generally acknowledged to be such; and when any of those who profess to be Christians fall into them, the propriety of admonishing, suspending, or excommunicating the offenders, as the case may be, is acknowledged by all. But we have here the strange phenomenon of a great and crying sin, which professing Christians not only indulge, but which they openly vindicate; to which they freely and publicly introduce their children; and, as if this were not enough, in behalf of which they take serious offence when the Ministers of Christ venture to speak of it in the terms which it deserves! It has been often said, that Christians are most in danger from things lawful. It is certain that there is often more danger from things *esteemed* lawful, than from those of which the iniquity is known and undisputed. We

are constrained, then, to dwell the more largely, and to remonstrate the more solemnly, on the sin under consideration, because we are confident it is not understood; because we are verily persuaded that a considerable portion of professing Christians need *instruction*, as well as *warning*, on the subject; and because we cherish the hope that nothing more than further light is necessary to induce thousands, who now rank among the patrons of the theatre, to forsake it with indignation.

I am perfectly sensible that all this will be called, by some, "the dark and scowling spirit of *Calvinism*;" that it will be stigmatised as "the cant of that *puritanical* austerity, which aims at being *righteous over-much*." And is it come to this, my brethren, that when the plainest demonstration, drawn from the word of God, and from the essential principles of morals, cannot be answered by argument, it is to be assailed by the pitiful weapons of sneer and abuse? Answer me one plain question. Does the representation which has been made, comport with God's word, or does it not? If *not*, reject it without hesitation. But if it *does*, then reject it at your peril! If it *does*, then, believe me, no man will gain any thing by loading it with contemptuous epithets. It *does* comport with that word! It is the truth of God! It is *SUCH Calvinism*; it is *SUCH Puritanism*, as will be found to stand the trial of the Great Day; when all those miserable apologies, and unscriptural subterfuges, in which multitudes who call themselves Christians, now take shelter, shall be covered with shame and contempt.

But is it a FACT that the doctrine which condemns the theatre, as an immoral and criminal amusement, is an austerity confined to the advocates of a particular creed? No, brethren; you ought to know that theatrical amusements have been unequivocally condemned, by the decent, and the virtuous part of society, in all ages. You ought to know, that even *pagans*, and Christians of *all denominations*, and in every period of the Church, have united in denouncing this class of amusements, as essentially corrupt and demoralizing in their nature. The following extracts will fully establish this position.

Plato tells us, that "plays raise the passions, and pervert the use of them; and, of consequence, are dangerous to morality." For this reason he banished them from his commonwealth. *Aristotle* lays it down as a rule, "that the seeing of comedies ought to be forbidden to young people; such indulgencies not being safe, until age and discipline have confirmed them in sobriety, fortified their virtue, and made them proof against debauchery." *Tacitus* informs us, that the "*Gorman* women were guarded against danger, and preserved their purity, by having no play-houses among them." And even *Ovid*, in his most licentious poems, speaks of the theatre as favourable to dissoluteness of principle and manners; and, afterwards, in a graver work, addressed to *Augustus*, advises the suppression of this amusement, as a grand source of corruption.*

* These quotations are taken from *Collier's View of the English Stage*, chap. vi.

In the *primitive Church*, both the players, and those who attend the theatre, were debarred from the christian sacraments. All the *Fathers*, who speak on the subject, with one voice attest that this was the case. A number of the early *Synods* or *Councils*, passed formal canons, condemning the theatre, and excluding actors, and those who intermarried with them, or openly encouraged them, from the privileges of the Church. The following declarations of *Theophilus*, pastor of *Antioch*, an eminent divine, who lived in the second century, are too pointed and appropriate to be omitted. "It is not lawful for *us* (Christians) to be present at the prizes of your *gladiators*, lest, by this means, we should be accessory to the murders there committed. Neither dare we take the liberty of attending on your *other shows*, lest our senses should be polluted and offended with indecency and profaneness. We dare not see any representations of lewdness. They are unwarrantable entertainments; and so much the worse, because the mercenary players set them off, with all the charms and advantages of speaking. God forbid that *CHRISTIANS*, who are remarkable for modesty and reserve, who are bound to enforce self-discipline, and who are trained up in virtue—God forbid, I say, that we should dishonour our *THOUGHTS*, much less our *PRACTICE*, with such wickedness as this!"*

* See *Collier's View*, &c. chap. vi. where also a number of quotations may be found, equally applicable and pointed, from *Tertullian*, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, *Minutius Felix*, *Cyprian*, *Lactantius*, *Chrysostom*, *Jerome*, and *Augustine*.

Almost all the reformed Churches have, at different times, spoken the same language, and enacted regulations of a similar kind. The Churches of *France*, *Holland*, and *Scotland*, have declared it to be "unlawful to go to comedies, tragedies, interludes, farces, or other stage plays, acted in public or private; because, in all ages, these have been forbidden among Christians, as bringing in a corruption of good manners." Surely this concurrence of opinion, in different countries, expressed not lightly or rashly, but as the voice of the whole Church, ought to command, at least the *respectful attention*, of all who remember how plain and how important is the duty of Christians to *follow the footsteps of the flock*.

To these authorities it may not be useless to add the judgment of a few conspicuous individuals, of different characters and situations, all of whom were well qualified to decide on the subject: individuals, not of austere or illiberal minds, and who have never been charged with the desire of contracting to an unreasonable degree the limits of public or private amusement.

Archbishop *Tillotson* was neither a *Calvinist* nor a *Puritan*; yet he, after some pointed and forcible reasoning against it, pronounces the play-house to be "the Devil's chapel;" a "nursery of licentiousness and vice;" "a recreation which ought not to be *allowed* among a *civilized*, much less a *Christian* people."^{*} Bishop *Collier* was very far from being either a *Calvi-*

^{*} *Christian Observer*, vol. iv. p. 46, 237.

nist or a *Puritan*; yet he solemnly declares, in the preface to a learned and able volume which he wrote against the theatre, that he was "persuaded nothing had done more to debauch the age in which he lived, than the *stage poets* and the *play-house*."* Sir *John Hawkins* was never considered as over-rigid or illiberal; but we find him speaking of the theatre in this pointed and unequivocal language: "Although it is said of the plays, that they teach morality; and of the stage, that it is the mirror of human life; these assertions are mere declamation, and have no foundation in truth or experience. On the contrary, a play house, and the regions about it, are the *very hot-beds of vice*."† Nay, even the infidel philosopher, *Rousseau*, in opposing the establishment of a theatre at *Geneva*, speaks of it in the following manner—"It is impossible that an establishment so contrary to our ancient manners can be generally applauded. How

* *Collier* was one of the most intolerant high-churchmen, and determined opponents of the Puritans in his day. Dr. *Johnson* says, being a "fierce and implacable non-juror," "he knew that an attack on the theatre would never make him suspected for a *Puritan*; he therefore published *A short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, I believe with no other motive than religious zeal, and honest indignation. He was formed for a controvertist; with sufficient learning; with diction vehement and pointed; with wit in the highest degree keen and sarcastic; and with all those powers exalted and invigorated by just confidence in his cause. His onset was violent; those passages which, while they stood single, had passed with little notice, when they were accumulated and exposed together, excited horror; the wise and the pious caught the alarm; and the nation wondered why it had suffered irreligion and licentiousness to be openly taught at the public charge." *Life of Congreve*. Such was Dr. *Johnson's* judgment of this writer and his cause.

† *Johnson's Life*.

"many generous citizens will see with indignation th
 "monument of luxury and effeminacy raise itself up
 "the ruins of our ancient simplicity! Do you thi
 "they will authorize this innovation by their presenc
 "after having loudly disapproved it? Be assured th
 "many go without scruple to the theatre at *Par*
 "who will never enter that of *Geneva*, because t
 "good of their country is dearer to them than the
 "amusement. Where would be the imprudent moth
 "who would dare to carry her daughter to this da
 "gerous school; and how many respectable wom
 "would think they dishonoured themselves in goin
 "there! If some persons at *Paris* abstain from th
 "theatre, it is simply on a principle of religion; an
 "surely this principle will not be less powerful among
 "us, who shall have the additional motives of *moral*
 "of virtue, and of *patriotism*; motives which wi
 "restrain those whom religion would not restrain.'

I have thus, my brethren, endeavoured, I trust i
 the fear of God, to discharge a duty which my o

* *Christian Observer*, vol. iv. p. 239. It is even practicabl
 the testimony of a player against himself and his pr
 A celebrated comic performer on the English stag
 a few years ago, meeting with a clergyman whom h
 enthusiastically known, and who had been for some tim
 in London, but had been obliged to leav
 the head of the church, said, "And I have been actin
 that I thought I should have died
 and me to come into the country fo
 and you died, it would have been i
 but had I, it would have been i
 As soon as I leave you, I shall b
 but they call a good play. I acknow
 thing and moral things in it; but af
 gain with my farce of '*A dish of al*
 on the head. Fine reformers we!'

face, and the present occasion, have laid upon me. It has been my aim to *spea*k the truth in love. If one word of a contrary kind has escaped me, I heartily wish it unsaid. But if, as I verily believe, what you have heard is the unexaggerated truth, may the Holy Spirit impress it on every heart! Brethren, the subject is a serious one! If the half of what has been told you concerning the theatre is true, then not only every professing *Christian*, but every *father of a family*, every *good citizen*, every *friend to social order and happiness*, ought to set his face against it as a flint, and discountenance it by all fair and honourable means. But, to such of you, my hearers, as profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, I address myself with especial confidence. Can you,—if you believe the foregoing statement—can you, after this, ever set your feet within the walls of a theatre? I do not ask whether you can go OFTEN, but can you go AT ALL? It is impossible for me to conceive HOW you can venture, without previously coming to the conclusion, that the morality of the Bible is too *rigid* and *austere* for YOU. But will you venture to adopt this conclusion? No, you dare not. To do so, would be to seal the death-warrant of your christian character. Brethren, I repeat it, the subject is a serious one! You may apologize and evade; you may secretly complain about “strictness,” and “austerity;” you may plead the current of fashion, and the habits of those around you, as much as you please: but the question is short; Will you obey God rather than man, or the reverse? Will you take the Scriptures, or the maxims of a corrupt

world for your guide? I leave it with your consciences and your God!

The remainder of this discourse will be addressed to the YOUNGER PART OF MY AUDIENCE.

In undertaking this service, my young friends, one of the most pleasing hopes that occurred to my mind, was, that God might bless it to some, at least, of your number. It is delightful to preach to the young! When we address the aged, or even those who have passed the meridian of life, and who have lived all their days in carelessness and sin, our hopes are comparatively small. The Spirit of God *may*, indeed, carry home to their hearts the word of his grace. But they have so long *resisted* and *grieved* that Spirit, that our prospect of success, speaking after the manner of men, is alas! awfully gloomy. But to admonish the young; to counsel those who have not yet become hardened by inveterate habits of iniquity; and to warn the tender and the inexperienced against the errors, the excesses, the false hopes, and the numberless dangers to which they are exposed; as they are among the most important, so they are also among the most hopeful and pleasant parts of our office. Happy, happy indeed, shall I be, if this service should prove the means of leading even ONE young person to serious consideration; to embrace that wisdom which is *profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come!*

Let me remind you, my young friends, that you live in an age, and in a city peculiarly ensnaring to

youth. The delusions of infidelity ; the allurements of criminal pleasure ; the arts of vain companions ; and the fascinations of diversified amusements, present on every side much to dazzle and to deceive ; much from which you are hourly in danger. And, alas ! how many youth, endowed with talents which might have done honour to religion, to their parents, and to themselves, are daily falling victims to these temptations, and sinking into infamy and destruction ! Shall we have the mortification, my young hearers, to see any of YOU among these wretched victims ? God forbid ! *Our heart's desire and prayer* is, that, despising equally the dreams of false principle, and the pollutions of licentious practice, you may be *followers of them who serve their generation by the will of God ; and who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises !*

Although the occasion has led me to speak particularly by of ONE kind of amusement, to which the young of the present day are lamentably addicted ; yet the same reasoning will apply, with no less force, to a number of others, to which you are equally exposed. I cannot stay, at present, to detail these, or to reason upon them. But whatever amusements—no matter how fashionable, or how strongly recommended they may be—whatever amusements have a tendency to produce dissipation of mind, to lead it away from God, and to impair a relish for spiritual employments ;—whatever amusements cannot be begun and ended with prayer, and are hostile to a

life of communion with the *Father of your spirits, and his son Jesus Christ*,—are criminal, are mischievous, and, of course, are to be avoided by all those who desire to be really wise, either for this world, or that which is to come.

Let no young person say, “All this reasoning might properly and strongly apply to *us* were we *professors of religion*. Those who are such, we acknowledge, are bound to act upon this plan; but *WE* make no profession, and, consequently, *are NOT* thus bound.” And is it, then, no sin for any but *professors of religion* to waste their time; to indulge in vanity and dissipation; to encourage obscenity, profaneness, and contempt of the gospel; and to give their influence to the support of iniquity as a trade? Is it no sin for any but *professors of religion* to *walk in the way of their hearts, and in the sight of their eyes, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and to be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God?* Alas! there cannot be a greater delusion! We are all under obligations in the sight of God, anterior to any act of profession on our part. Whatever, then, is a sin in a *professor*, is a sin in *any other person*. Yes, my young friends, whether you are professors of religion or not, you are *rational creatures*; you have *immortal souls*; you are under a *holy law*; you are hastening to the *bar of God*; and, as such, in the name of the Master whom I serve, I put in his claim to your affections and your services. As such, I charge you, by all that is glorious in God; by all that is tender in re-

deeming love ; by all that is precious in the hopes of the soul ; and by all that is solemn in eternity ; that you renounce every thing that is hostile to the service of Christ ; and that you make it your study to *glorify him in your bodies, and in your spirits which are his.*

.. To such of my young hearers as have urged me to the performance of this service, let me especially say—Another voice, speaking through a catastrophe of the most heart-rending nature, has proclaimed, that the theatre, and all that train of unhallowed pleasures, to which the young are so much attached, are madness and folly ! Will you not hear this voice and lay it to heart ? If, after all that has lately passed ; if, after having your attention seriously drawn to this subject, both by the providence and the word of God ; if, after the part you have taken in THE EXERCISES OF THIS DAY, you are still found incorrigibly devoted to those pleasures—allow me affectionately to say—*you will have no cloak for your sin.* You will have reason to fear the special and destroying judgments of God. *For they that being often reprov'd, harden their necks, shall suddenly be cut off, and that without remedy.*

But remember my young friends, that something more is necessary to form a CHRISTIAN than mere abstinence from what are called *criminal pleasures.* You may keep at the greatest distance from all of them ; you may be models of the industry, the temperance, and the sobriety, which constitute the orderly citizen ; and yet be *far from the king-*

dom of heaven. Remember, that, *except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.* Remember, that unless you receive Christ, by a living faith, as your Prophet, Priest, and King, and study to *walk in him* in all holy obedience, you are Christians only in name. It is the religion which dwells in the heart, and which controls, adorns, and sanctifies the life, that I recommend to your choice. With this religion, and this alone, you will be happy in yourselves, and a blessing to others. With this religion, you will be prepared to enjoy prosperity with comfort, and to meet adversity with resignation. With this religion, you will be able to contemplate death without alarm, and to *rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

Beloved youth ! the hope of your parents, and of the church ; seek this religion. *Give neither sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eye-lids,* until you can, on good grounds, call it YOUR OWN. To the grace of the Saviour we commend you. May he give you to experience the *light of his countenance,* and *the joys of his salvation !* May he teach you how to live, and how to die ! May he *guide you by his counsel,* and *afterwards receive you to glory !—* AMEN.

NOTE.

The melancholy dispensation of Providence to which the preceding discourse refers, has been so deeply impressed upon the mind of every American, that no information can be supposed to be necessary to render those passages which relate to the affecting scene, perfectly intelligible to every reader; yet, should the eye of a stranger, some eight or ten years hence, accidentally fall on the foregoing pages the following account may not be altogether useless.

On the night of December 26, 1811, the theatre in the city of *Richmond, Virginia*, was unusually crowded; a new play having drawn together an audience of not less than six hundred persons. Toward the close of the performances, just before the commencement of the last act of the concluding pantomime, the scenery caught fire, from a lamp inadvertently raised to an improper position, and, in a few minutes the whole building was wrapped in flames. The doors being very few, and the avenues leading to them extremely narrow, the scene which ensued was truly a scene of horror? It may be in some degree imagined, but can never be adequately described!—About *seventy-five* persons perished in the flames. Among these were the governor of the State; the President of the Bank of *Virginia*; one of the most eminent Attornies belonging to the bar of the commonwealth; a number of other respectable Gentlemen; and about FIFTY FEMALES, a large portion of whom were among the Ladies of the greatest conspicuity and fashion in the city.

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